JINTY NELSON

Janet Laughland Nelson

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elected Fellow of the British Academy 1996

by

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Summary. Jinty Nelson was a leading scholar of early medieval European history, with a special focus on Francia in the late 8th and 9th centuries. She was at the forefront of a generation that re-vivified the study of the early middle ages, in her case especially concerned with the working of the Carolingian political system and the re-evaluation of the role of the aristocracy alongside king and church in early medieval politics. She was a pioneer of the study of women's and gender history, demonstrating not only its intrinsic interest and importance, but also that political history could not be understood without attention to both. She had a deep and humane interest in the people of the past. Her academic career was spent entirely at King's College, London, where she was an outstanding and much-loved teacher. Her professional contribution and recognition went far beyond that, and were marked by her election in 2000 as the first woman President of the Royal Historical Society. She became a champion of the subject and its teaching, wherever that was practised. In 2006 she was made a Dame of the British Empire for services to History.

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Janet L Nelson

Janet Laughland Nelson – Jinty as she was always known – was the eldest of three daughters of Elizabeth [Leila] Barnes Muir, née Laughland, and William [Billy] Wilson Muir, both from Kilmarnock. Her father was a General Practitioner. Her mother trained as a teacher, but the bar on women teaching after marriage, not lifted until 1944, prevented her from following her career. Her parents, like all her uncles and aunts, were graduates of the University of Glasgow. The family of her maternal grandmother included a Rector of Aberdeen Grammar School, knighted for his involvement in wider educational matters, and a Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Regius Professor of Divinity at St Andrews.

Jinty herself was born in Blackpool, where her father practised; her education was entirely in England. It began at the local school, but then moved to Keswick Grammar School in Cumbria, a co-educational state school which took some boarders from the Lakeland valleys. Jinty was sent there on medical advice. She suffered from childhood deafness, which it was judged the Blackpool breezy air aggravated. Greta Hall, the girls' boarding house with its view over Derwentwater and the mountains, had once been the home of Coleridge and Southey: it was steeped in the history of the Lake poets. Keswick, along with visits to their family house in Little Langdale, gave her a lifelong love of the Lake District. She excelled at History, but she would later remember an outstanding Classics teacher who gave her proficiency in Latin and Greek.

From Keswick she won an Exhibition to Newnham College, Cambridge, in 1961, where she read for the History Tripos, taking a First in Part 2 in 1964. At Cambridge she met her future husband Howard Nelson, a student of Chinese language and culture. They were married in 1965, divorced in 2010. They had two children together, Lizzie and Billy, born in 1972 and 1974.

Graduation with first class honours was followed immediately by work with Walter Ullmann. Her college tutor at Newnham had been Kathleen Hughes, a celebrated student of early Irish ecclesiastical history. Those of us who think of Jinty as a natural medievalist may be surprised to know that her own future direction balanced on a knife-edge at this point. When asked in 2010 why she studied medieval history, her answer was that she had decided to do research, and there was a real question about with whom to do it.[1] There were two Cambridge historians whom she admired – E.H. Carr, historian of modern Russia, and Walter Ullmann, a medievalist. The final choice owed more than a little to accident – she spoke to the medievalist first!

Her thesis topic was 'Rituals of Royal Inauguration in Early Medieval Europe: from *dux populi* to *athleta Christi*'. She completed in three years. Asked later about influences on her, she cited not Ullmann but Percy Ernst Schramm, another scholar who worked on

[1] Nottingham honorary degree interview, 2010.
https://youtu.be/TRakDApTyWM?si=T_JxVvmATnbQeccW (accessed 27 November 2025).

Ordines but whose interests, unlike Ullmann's, encompassed ritual and symbolism. As this later preference suggests, Jinty soon moved away from an Ullmann-esque legalistic and constitutional approach, a shift captured in his own descriptions of her as a brilliant but rebellious daughter. His training in rigorous research methods was, nonetheless, a lifelong foundation. His first rhetorical question to her 'Of course you know German' was also a game-changer. She did not, but quickly learnt. Her approach to languages is a first key to her success as a historian, grounded in her ability to read and engage with the work of colleagues in France and Germany.

Immediately after completion she left the UK and accompanied her husband to the Hong Kong New Territories where he was undertaking anthropological research in a Chinese village**.** Never a passive partner, she read widely on anthropology herself. Hong Kong and anthropology were to have lasting effects. Wendy Davies remembers her talking later about gifts and gift-giving, insisting that gifts were given for a purpose, and citing the 'white china elephants given to herself and Howard in China to secure the donor's son access to university'. The Hong Kong period also initiated her life-long vegetarianism. 'As a sign of acceptance, like all the other villagers, she and Howard were given a chicken in a paper bag, which they were to kill and eat on the right festival day. She couldn't bring herself to kill the chicken, so she became a vegetarian instead.'[2]

Returning in 1969 she was unable at first to get an academic post. She applied for several and was turned down. Young scholars in the 2020s will feel an immediate bond. This may have been in part because 'early medieval history' did not yet exist as a recognised subfield, a lack which Jinty's own career would do so much to redress. She joined the Foreign Office as a researcher, working on 19th- and 20th-century history. In 1970 she was finally appointed to a lectureship at King's College, London, where she stayed for the rest of her working life. She became a Reader in 1989, was raised to a personal chair in 1993, and in 1994 became Director of the Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies. She retired in 2007.

The years in between saw a series of positions and honours recognising her growing stature as a scholar and teacher, and her growing importance in the historical profession.

From 1975 to 1979 she was Honorary Secretary of the Ecclesiastical History Society, and President in 1993–4. She was elected fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1979, as a member of its Council in 1994, and in 2000 became the first woman President in its over 130-year history. In 1996 she was elected Fellow of the British Academy. In 1999–2001 she was the first Chair of its Humanities Group, and in both 1999–2000 and 2000–01 a Vice-President. In 2013 she gave the Academy's Raleigh Lecture, on Charlemagne

[2] Lyndal Roper, personal communication.

and Europe.[3] In 2000 she was elected Corresponding Fellow of the Medieval Academy of America. Her interest in teaching was recognised in January 2018 when the Jinty Nelson Award for Inspirational Teaching & Supervision in History – later renamed the Jinty Nelson Teaching Fellowship – was established by the Royal Historical Society. In 2019 she was awarded the Historical Association's Medlicott medal for 'Outstanding services and current contributions to History'. In 2006 she was made a Dame of the British Empire in the Birthday Honours, for 'Services to History'. Her last decades were marked by a string of Honorary doctorates from the Universities of East Anglia, St Andrews, Queen's University Belfast, York, Liverpool, Nottingham and Glasgow.

These honours ran *pari passu* with scholarly enterprises and academic good citizenship. She was a member of two editorial collectives – *Past and Present* and *History Workshop Journal*, both journals with a radical edge. She was a founder member of the Women's History Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research, and co-convener of the outstandingly successful Early Medieval Seminar there. From 2000 to 2010 she co-directed the AHRC-funded *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England*, a major digital project embracing new technology – she was never an academic dinosaur. She co-founded and co-edited with Rosemary Horrox the *Manchester Medieval Sources* series, aimed at providing key sources in translation for student use. Its first volume was a translation she had herself made for her Special Subject students. With Henrietta Leyser she edited the *Oxford History of Medieval Europe*. There was much behind-the-scenes influence. David Bates's *Medieval World* series took shape around her East Dulwich dinner table, where she also volunteered her *Charles the Bald* as a first volume – a promise very quickly fulfilled. In 1993 she was invited to join the European Science Foundation's Programme on the 'Transformation of the Roman World', a 5-year interdisciplinary project covering Western Europe from the 5th to 9th centuries. This latter, like the much less formal Bucknell group of academic friends, was collaborative, her favourite mode of working.

Scholarship

Both honours and good citizenship speak to her standing as a historian. That reputation is reflected in her astonishing output; over 180 published items, sometimes as many as six in one year. References to 'Nelson' usually require not merely the year, but a distinguishing 'a,b,c …'. The bulk of those items are articles; there are only two single-authored books and one edition/translation among them. The articles themselves are overwhelmingly publications in collections of essays, whether *Festschriften* or the publications of conference proceedings, or, in the case of Bucknell, of an informal

[3] J.L. Nelson, 'Charlemagne and Europe', *Journal of the British Academy*, 2 (2014), 125–52 at 135.

though regular group meeting. This is itself witness to her academic stature. She was in constant demand as a speaker at conferences – in spite of her reputation as a last minute, if not past midnight, deliverer of her paper for publication. She gave many editors sleepless nights. She was counted as a colleague and friend by major scholars across Europe and the USA. The pattern of publication arises also from one of her own preferred methods of working. She was a committed collaborator, who loved and flourished in the cut and thrust of debate and discussion. It means that most of her articles have gone through the salutary processes of design for an audience and reaction from it. They are also influenced by the identity of the dedicatee, in the case of *Festschriften*, or the theme of the event.

One result is that definitive and final statements – or even interim summations – on topics are not always forthcoming. This was a characteristic of Jinty as a scholar – not only permitted but encouraged by this form of publication. Genre matters. She often revisited the same subject, even the same exemplum or anecdote. Usually this was to enrich earlier discussion, as her own understanding and questions developed, and as she approached them in different contexts. Sometimes it was to change her mind, something Jinty did with refreshing openness, acknowledging the sheer difficulty of certainty. One of Jinty's strengths and part of the excitement of her work was her readiness to air and float ideas and interpretation where certainty was difficult, to face and ask new questions, to be imaginative in her determined attempts to pursue real people in a remote and under-documented past. The origin of so much of her publication in oral delivery and subsequent debate contributed to this, and perhaps, too, to her discursive, provisional, sometimes almost colloquial style – though this was also affected by the fact that her teaching fed directly into her publication and was in constant dialogue with it. Her pattern of publication did, however, contribute to occasional, and unwarranted, worries about how seriously her work was taken, especially her concern that she did not produce many monographs, often considered the gold standard of academic History. The four collections of essays – dating from 1986 to 2007 – were among the results of this concern.[4]

Jinty herself summed up the themes of her work in her 2008 interview at the Institute of Historical Research: 'early medieval European: politics and ritual, women's history and gender, ecclesiastical, social and cultural history. As my publications suggest, I tend

[4] J.L. Nelson, *Politics and Ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London: Hambledon Press, 1986); J.L. Nelson, *The Frankish World, 750–900* (London: Hambledon Press,1996); J.L. Nelson, *Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe: Alfred, Charles the Bald, and Others* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999); J.L. Nelson, *Courts, Elites and Gendered Power in the Early Middle Ages: Charlemagne and Others* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

to stick to choices, once made.'[5] She ranged widely across early medieval Europe both chronologically and geographically– including for example the Wessex of King Alfred – but her special focus was on Francia, particularly under Carolingian rulers from the mid 8th to the end of the 9th century, including questions of continuity, or not, with their Merovingian predecessors. It was a rewriting of the long 9th century. One overarching theme was politics and governance, which encompassed a long-term concern with the re-evaluation of the Carolingian aristocracy, of the role of the church, and a parallel and continuing definition of the movement known as the Carolingian Renaissance, in which both, alongside kings, were involved. Her work in these respects was part of broader historiographical shifts; she was not a lone pioneer, but she was at the forefront, and hers was a distinctive voice. Where she was a pioneer was in the study of women and gender. She made both integral to the understanding of Carolingian politics and governance, but her contribution and influence here were much wider. The dominant interest of all her work was people, the lived experience, values and beliefs of individuals in the past.

She began as a student of ritual, an interest she never lost. It informed much of her work, especially as interpreted through anthropological lenses. Her thesis with Walter Ullmann was on royal *Ordines*, the clerical scripts for rituals of consecration and anointing of rulers. Her original publication plan was for an edition of these, and she continued to produce important work on them throughout her career. This would increasingly include consideration of queens and their making, including demonstrating how far that illuminated kingly inaugurations.[6] In 1966, her second year as a PhD student at Cambridge, she joined the Ecclesiastical History Society. Jinty went on to publish thirteen papers with the Society in its annual conference proceedings, plus two articles in the *Festschrift* volumes for former presidents, Rosalind Hill and Michael Wilkes. These included most of her earliest publications, many of them on rituals.

She was already sceptical that *Ordines* held all, or even the most important, answers on king-making. They should always be read with awareness of the limitations of the texts we have, and of what they omit or hide about the full range of inauguration rituals.[7] By 1977 she was stressing how 'rarely [clerics] cared to document non-clerical

[5] IHR (Institute of Historical Research), *Making History: The views of eminent historians on the evolution of the discipline from the perspective of their own fields and interests* (2008) – henceforward IHR Interview. https://archives.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/interviews/Nelson_Janet.html

[6] J.L. Nelson, 'The First Use of the Second Anglo-Saxon *Ordo*', in Julia Barrow & Andrew Wareham (eds), *Myth, Rulership, Church and Charters. Essays in Honour of Nicholas Brooks* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 117–26. On queens and the importance of considering them, J.L. Nelson, 'The Second English *Ordo*', published for the first time in *Politics and Ritual* (1968), pp. 361–74, and J.L. Nelson, 'Early Medieval Rites of Queen-making and the shaping of medieval queenship' (1997), reprinted in *Rulers and Ruling Families*, 301–15.

[7] J.L. Nelson, 'Ritual and Reality in the Early Medieval Ordines' (1975), reprinted in Nelson, *Politics and Ritual*, 329–39 at 338.

procedures', even though the involvement of the laity in inauguration was clear from other texts.[8] She had also moved from a legalistic and quasi-constitutional reading of *Ordines*, involving questions of sovereignty and 'churchification', though there are discussions of all of this in her work. Her interests were shifting to ritual more broadly, as part of the 'Ideology of power', a named section in her important essay in the *New Cambridge Medieval History*.[9] Under the influence of anthropological ideas, she came to see its presence and significance in all aspects of Carolingian rule;[10] in the assembly, the hunt, the feast, court life – the latter three involving royal women as well as men. Along with the 'Logistics of power' and 'Sociology of power', ritual provided answers to questions about how power worked. But it was only part of that ideology of power, which included the written word. Both were forms of communication.[11]

The audience to which that communication was addressed included the Carolingian aristocracy. Appreciation and understanding of them was a recurring and fundamental theme. She felt they had had a distinctly bad press: 'greedy and boorish, incapable of sharing the higher aspirations of kings and clergy, lacking any sense of public interest', Michael Wallace-Hadrill's '"repulsively realistic ... hairy nobleman"'.[12] She identified a pessimism in the post-Second World War Francophone view of Carolingian rule and its 'progressive dissolution', one of whose basic assumptions was that 'the blame for collapse can be put on the moral failings of the Frankish aristocracy'. 'Their jealousy and anger, greed and egoism' brought the empire's ruin for Halphen; Ganshof depicted them as 'ruffians, intellectually unequipped to understand the ideals held out to them by monarch and church'.[13] A natural rebel, Jinty never blindly accepted established views whoever their influential proponents. Perhaps especially in her earlier years, much of her best work was stimulated by strong disagreements with other people's seemingly authoritative arguments, which provided the 'grit' from which the pearls grew.

Jinty saw the aristocracy as essential to Carolingian – to all early medieval – rule. Their values, their concerns were central to Carolingian politics. Far from boorish ruffians, they had political ideas and ideals, expressed in capitularies – the legal/administrative texts which were products of assemblies where they played such a big

[8] J.L. Nelson, 'Inauguration Rituals' (1977), reprinted in Nelson, *Politics and Ritual*, 283–307 at 287.
[9] J.L. Nelson, 'The Frankish Kingdoms, 814–898: the West', in Rosamund McKitterick (ed.), *New Cambridge Medieval History*, II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1995), 110–68.
[10] See especially J.L. Nelson, 'The Lord's Anointed and the People's Choice, Carolingian Royal Ritual' (1987), reprinted in Nelson, *The Frankish World*, 99–31.
[11] An essential companion to this 1987 paper is J.L. Nelson, 'Literacy in Carolingian Government' (1990), reprinted in Nelson, *The Frankish World, 750–900*, 1–36 – given pride of first place in this volume of her essays, though not the earliest in date.
[12] J.L. Nelson, *Charles the Bald* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 48.
[13] J.L. Nelson, 'Rewriting the history of the Franks' (1987), reprinted in *The Frankish World*, 169–81 at 170.

role – and in histories addressed to them.[14] Understanding their values, their concerns, what made them tick, was essential. Carolingian politics was not a zero-sum game; royal and aristocratic power could and did grow together. In the end the loss of their loyalty *was* what undermined the last Carolingians, a reluctant abandonment.[15] Loyalty was one of their core values. So too were family and inheritance. Mid 9th-century Carolingian politics posed acute problems for them. Brother fought against brother, brothers divided or sought to divide kingdoms, thus threatening the scattered lands and offices held by aristocrats and their followers. There were few more lonely figures than the aristocrat who had made the wrong political choices and calculations, who lacked the support of family but also of lord and patron – the king. A successful Carolingian king was an expert in managing these men, including and especially through great assemblies where the essential presence of the king could be experienced by the great, and not so great, where justice was dispensed, gifts were brought and returned, and 'every kind of problem' discussed. These were occasions of 'great public rituals, involving the aristocracy' designed to 'lodge in the memory, enhancing royal authority and collective consciousness'.[16] Assemblies were also, in Charlemagne's case at least, occasions of *familiaritas,* for meeting, joking, listening – but also for keeping men under surveillance.

Churchmen were also involved, and again as partners and agents not as rivals. They were allies of royal power from the very beginnings of Carolingian rule; indeed this was an important element of continuity from the rule of the Merovingians. Churchmen always needed the king, just as he needed them – including their resources. But Charles the Bald staying on church estates was not a weakened ruler reliant on the church, but one exploiting the established resources of the Carolingian state. Alongside the aristocracy, churchmen were the other source of regional power. In her view 'one of the most misleading aspects of the regional principalities scenario [i.e. the study of political developments of the late 9th and especially 10th centuries] is the absence of churchmen'.[17]

Much of this work came to fruition in her book on Charles the Bald. This is political biography in the fullest sense; a Carolingian ruler working in a 9th-century context and through a system of government both brilliantly described in the opening chapters. Hers is not the Charles the Bald of traditional historiography. She challenged the established narrative of Carolingian decline, of the stunting of royal sovereignty, of monarchy 'descended from its throne' as power leached to the lay aristocracy and the church.[18]

[14] J.L. Nelson, 'Public *Histories* and Private History in the work of Nithard' (1985), reprinted in *Politics and Ritual*, 195–237 – one of her few refereed journal articles.
[15] Here she was in agreement with the work of Stuart Airlie.
[16] Nelson, 'The Frankish Kingdoms, 814–898: the West', 430.
[17] Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, p. 234.
[18] J.L. Nelson, 'Legislation and Consensus in the reign of Charles the Bald' (1983), reprinted in *Politics and Ritual*, 91–116 at 110.

Rather Charles was a skilled exponent of Carolingian rule when assessed in his own context and in relation to his own goals and purposes, emphatically a man who understood his aristocracy and knew how to manage them.

In all this Jinty was a powerful voice in wider historiographical shifts, away from the view of big bad barons essentially opposed to royal power, of kings growing too reliant on the church; away too from constitutional and administrative history, and towards a sociological and cultural history of power, its location and its exercise.

There are times when her salutary insistence on sympathetic understanding sails dangerously close to rose-coloured judgement, a 'Merrie Francia' where happy peasants sit down for 'alfresco lunches' with stewards and lords.[19] But she did recognise how aristocratic power was experienced at the receiving end. In her first Bucknell contribution she was critical of the way the powerful distorted local justice, swinging judgements in their own favour – including churchmen, more often seen 'asserting rights to dues' or pursuing old claims rather than as the 'peacemakers of clerical ideology'.[20] In this Bucknell piece where peasants were her focus, the unacceptable face of power was more apparent. She recognised too an aristocracy for whom peasants could be a more serious threat than Vikings. In the year 859, when peasants organised against the Vikings, the local nobility reacted – and slew the peasants. The Edict of Pîtres prohibited such organisations in general, no doubt after assembly discussion in which aristocratic voices had spoken loudly. Aristocratic status and social control, and maintaining both, were paramount concerns.[21]

Jinty's developing understanding of both aristocracy and church went hand in hand with her developing ideas about the Carolingian Renaissance. Like others, she saw this as an educational, but also profoundly moral movement; an attempt to shape and mould society and specifically its elite. It was a Carolingian project, latterly seen by her as arising from Charlemagne's own personal concerns. A deeply devout man in her reading, Charles demanded 'high standards of introspection and self-correction ... by precept if not entirely by example [Jinty could sometimes pull her punches in judgement of Charles] driving through a reform agenda, which had long-term effects.'[22] His 'personal quest for self-knowledge and self-realisation ... emerges most clearly in his imperial years ... generalised over time into a cultural programme.'[23] The aim of the Carolingian

[19] J.L. Nelson, 'The settings of the gift in the reign of Charlemagne', in Wendy Davies & Paul Fouracre (eds), *Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 116–48 at 146–7.

[20] J.L. Nelson, 'Dispute Settlement in Carolingian West Francia' (1986), reprinted in *The Frankish World*, 51–74 at 70.

[21] Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, p. 194.

[22] J.L. Nelson, 'Writing Early Medieval biography', *History Workshop Journal*, 50 (2000), 129–36 at 134.

[23] J.L. Nelson, 'Charlemagne the man', in Joanna Story (ed.), *Charlemagne: Empire and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 22–37 at 35.

Renaissance was the transformation, shaping, more thorough Christianisation of society, specifically of the elite.

In her early work she stressed its limits, the lack of mechanisms for its implementation – another breach with the work of her supervisor Ullmann.[24] In later work she would argue that the aristocracy were both its target and its agents, subjected to its teaching programme in assembly and court.[25] She continued to discuss the mechanisms for its spread, of its control, latterly extending these wider and wider: via local churches and their proprietors,[26] and through preaching in the vernacular.[27] Here, as elsewhere, she never stopped thinking, rethinking and refining her ideas.

Her emphasis was increasingly on the personal and individual acceptance of this project by the elite, which she came to see as one of those 'genuine openings for self discovery and self-realisation when the state enables rather than represses'.[28] This enabling state sits somewhat uneasily with a Charlemagne whom she describes on one occasion suddenly deciding to test lay godparents on their knowledge of Christianity. Jinty saw this as a king 'exceptionally aware of his responsibility', though she also recognised it as 'naming and shaming'. [29] The extended court in the assembly was likened by Jinty to a party conference; [30] this has all the bonhomie of the Whips' office. There was another side, decidedly less benign, to the Charles of the court at Aachen; chatting and joking with those who had come from afar, but also springing tests of Christian knowledge on the unsuspecting. The Carolingian Renaissance, in aim if not always in realisation, was arguably more Foucauldian than Jinty liked to admit.[31]

The Carolingian Renaissance, as Jinty presents it, valorised women. Dhuoda, an aristocratic woman to whom she frequently returned, appears in 1986 alongside religious women as a domestic figure, but as such crucial to the Carolingian church's aims for the

[24] J.L. Nelson, 'On the Limits of the Carolingian Renaissance' (1977), reprinted in *Politics and Ritual*, 49–67.

[25] E.g. Nelson, 'Public *Histories* and Private History', 201–3.

[26] J.L. Nelson, 'Revisiting the Carolingian Renaissance', in Jamie Kreiner & Helmut Reimitz (eds), *Motions of Late Antiquity: Essays on Religion, Politics, and Society in Honour of Peter Brown* (*Cultural Encounters in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages,* 20; Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 331–46.

[27] J.L. Nelson, 'Epilogue', in Robert Gallagher, Edward Roberts & Francesca Tinti (eds), *Languages of Early Medieval Charters: Latin, Germanic Vernaculars and the Written Word* (*Brill's Series on the Early Middle Ages*, 27; Leiden: Brill, 2021), 522–38 at 523.

[28] J.L. Nelson, 'Did Charlemagne have a private life?', in David Bates, Julia Crick & Sarah Hamilton (eds), *Writing Medieval Biography, 750–1250: Essays in Honour of Frank Barlow* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), 15–28 at 25.

[29] J.L. Nelson, 'Aachen as a place of power' (2001), reprinted in *Courts, Elites and Gendered Power*, 1–23 at 15–16.

[30] J.L. Nelson, 'Was Charlemagne's Court a Courtly Society' (2003, reprinted in *Courts, Elites and Gendered Power*, 39–57 at 43.

[31] Nelson, 'Did Charlemagne have a private life?', 25.

transformation of lay morality through a thorough-going Christianisation imbibed and policed in the domestic setting.[32] She later argued that medieval historians' engagement with Norbert Elias's 'civilising process' was, like Elias's own work, 'usually about men'. Courtliness, in her view, was made in the earlier middle ages and women needed to be included in its creation and understanding.[33] She stressed the civilising role of women, as agents in the formation of moral character. In the court's *conversationes*[34] and *colloquia* women could speak and men listened – 'sometimes'.[35]

If Jinty's work on aristocracy, church and Carolingian rule was part of wider historiographical developments, her work on women and gender was truly pioneering. Women were another element in her sociology of Carolingian power: aristocratic women like Dhuoda, but especially royal. Both were in their legitimate element in the *domus*/household and its particular manifestation, the royal court. The queen became essential to government and household, so much so that Jinty argued that in the absence of a queen in Charlemagne's later years, his daughters acted as a substitute collective one.[36] The court was a central mechanism of politics, paralleling the role of assemblies. It gave women cultural authority. The necessary condition of that was a dynastic politics whose values were monarchic and regnal.[37] Royal women operated within the resulting politics of family and succession, the shifts in these watched with attention, and often anxiety, by aristocrats and especially courtiers. She, like them, understood dynastic strategies but also the family lifecycles which disrupted them.

Jinty already showed awareness of all this in her first publication on queens in 1978, in a *Festschrift* for a woman ex-president of the Ecclesiastical History Society.[38] A steady stream of articles from the late 1980s and 1990s onwards elaborated and extended her understanding. The historiographical context within which Jinty was working in the 1980s was exciting, but not always friendly. Women's History, like the Second-wave

[32] J.L. Nelson, 'Les Femmes et l'évangélisation au XIe siècle', *Revue du Nord*, 68 (1986), 471–85, reworked and extended in J.L. Nelson, 'Women and the Word in the Earlier Middle Ages' (1990), reprinted in *The Frankish World*, 199–221. The reworking emphasised class along with gender.

[33] J.L. Nelson, 'Gendering courts in the early medieval west' (2004), reprinted in *Courts, Elites and Gendered Power*, 185–97 at 186.

[34] For what Jinty meant by this word, see J.L. Nelson, 'La Cour Impériale de Charlemagne' (1998), reprinted in *Rulers and Ruling Families*, 177–91 at 180: 'Le mot impliquait toute une manière de vivre [in n. 17 'manière de vivre en train de se perfectionner']; des conversations, bien sûr, mais des conversations sérieuses, y compris politiques.' It is a term she often uses, including in relation to women at court.

[35] Nelson, 'Gendering courts', 197.

[36] J.L. Nelson, 'Women at the Court of Charlemagne: A Case of Monstrous Regiment?' (1993), reprinted in *The Frankish World*, 43–61 – and its French language predecessor, J.L. Nelson, 'La famille de Charlemagne' (1991), reprinted in *Rulers and Ruling Families*, 194–212.

[37] Nelson, 'Gendering courts', 197.

[38] J.L. Nelson, 'Queens as Jezebels: Brunhild and Balthild in Merovingian History' (1978), reprinted in *Politics and Ritual*, 1–48.

feminism of which it was a result, was radical. British feminism was closely allied with the Left, a socialist more than liberal feminism and one well aware of the intersections of gender and class. Its politics matched Jinty's personal ones. She was a lifelong socialist, a position no doubt initially fostered by her mother's commitment to the Labour party; her mother had stood as Labour candidate in Blackpool in the 1950 election. She had – unsurprisingly given her membership of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament – been a supporter, including actively, of the Greenham Common Women, whose protest against Cruise missiles had begun in 1981.

Women's History had taken off in this wider political context, especially in the Anglophone world, and for the early middle ages initially above all in the USA. The Women's History Seminar was established at the Institute of Historical Research in 1986, with Jinty as a founding member. This was a ground-breaking development. History Workshop, the radical collective with which Jinty was involved from 1990, was already welcoming, but there were as yet neither chairs nor entry-level jobs in women's history, and the seminar's historian notes that 'it would be fair to say that it [the Institute of Historical Research] still had a pretty masculine vibe.'[39] The seminar resulted from lobbying by established scholars within the University of London – Penny Corfield, Pat Thane and Jinty. Penny recollected 'some hostile huffing and puffing from a few noisily conservative men at the IHR' whose effect, however, was to rally 'left/liberal support from the surprisingly large number of men and women who were initially sceptical'.[40]

As that scepticism reveals, the reception of these developments within the historical profession remained wary, critical, sometimes outright hostile. The work on early medieval women was accused of anachronism in the sense of 'a determination to contribute to women's studies and to use its language and concepts', deploying interpretative methods which 'owe[d] more to the influence of modern feminism than to the period under discussion', and most seriously of all treating 'a promising body of evidence ... within an unsound conceptual framework' leading to the conclusion that the whole enterprise was 'methodologically flawed'.[41] Some of this was determinedly unsympathetic, but there was a kernel of truth, as Jinty recognised in 1990 in 'Women and the Word'. It was here that she cited precisely the review from which the above quotations are taken and herself noted that 'the earlier medieval evidence, varied and extensive as it is, is also more

[39] Kelly Boyd, 'Women's History Seminar', in D. Manning (ed.), *Talking History, Seminar Culture at the Institute of Historical Research, 1921–2021* [University of London, 2024]. https://read.uolpress.co.uk/read/607fb028–5d67–49ab-aae1-b40dcec6d2fc/section/996d17a2–3261–4085-b426-e60c-f54ea066#hsec–84 (accessed 18 November 2025).

[40] Boyd, 'Women's History Seminar'.

[41] Judith McClure, 'Review of John A. Nichols and Lilian T. Shank, *Medieval Religious Women*', *English Historical Review*, 102 (1987), 1005.

problematic than some recent historians have implied'.[42] But she was also clear that research on women could and should be integrated into wider political and religious history.[43] This paper was her own response. It was a wide-ranging survey, now going well beyond queens and queenship. As in her work on ritual there was inspiration from anthropology – awareness, e.g., of the extent to which women might be 'good to think with' for the male authors of our texts and a warning thus about the use of problematic evidence. The article is a demonstration of how that problematic evidence could be used. Even more than in 1978, this was Jinty engaging with the concerns of women's history, and at the same time placing them firmly within the methodological mainstream. That same methodological rigour was evident in her Bucknell paper of 1995, where she chose to write about women and property.[44] In a tour de force she demonstrated the need for utmost caution in interpreting women's claims on property but also how far the very negotiability of those claims could be used by a woman. She showed how 'a determined widow ... a wary widow', acting in a society where male kin or churchmen could use women as 'agents, allies, pawns', could have 'power of a sort ... some room for manoeuvre'.

Much of her work from now on would demonstrate not simply how far research on women could illuminate the political workings of the Carolingian state, but that those workings could not be understood without that research. Her influence in this respect was felt across Europe as well as throughout the Anglophone world, especially but far from exclusively among young scholars and postgraduates. It is a measure of her success that no one would now feel able to write about early medieval politics without full attention to women – *all* women, daughters, sisters, wives, celibate women – and family.

The court was the *domus* transformed, a public place, a place for women's activity. It was also a place of danger for women, always at risk of its scandal and rumour. In 2004 she would speak of 'women at work' in the palace, meaning their roles in the household magnified and transformed by class and royal status.[45] In 1998, she had used the identical phrase to signal the activities of women, especially Charlemagne's daughters, flitting around the palace, a danger to young men, disquieting all those, including Charlemagne's later biographer Einhard, who felt deep unease at the inversions of power and authority they represented.[46] For such men, Charles' son Louis the Pious, cleansing the court of his sisters, restored proper patriarchal relations. Jinty was well aware that the Carolingian Renaissance, for all its emphasis on Christianisation, operated within a

[42] Nelson, 'Women and the Word', 202.
[43] Commenting on the work of Karl Leyser, Nelson, 'Women and the Word', 201.
[44] J.L. Nelson, 'The wary widow' (1995), reprinted in *Courts, Elites and Gendered Power*, 82–113.
[45] Nelson, 'Gendering courts', 197.
[46] Nelson, 'La Cour impériale de Charlemagne', 190–1.

deeply patriarchal society. There was a valuation of marriage and family, the 'ascent of monogamy',[47] but control of women was at its heart. Northild was a noblewoman who fully assimilated the messages of that moral renaissance, including canon law's prohibitions of certain sorts of sexual intercourse. She was moved to action by them, appealing to Louis the Pious against her husband on these grounds, only to find herself abandoned and let down by the emperor and his churchmen in a closing of the ranks of patriarchy. Jinty went so far as to suggest that the case was possibly stage-managed by Louis and his advisers, with Northild as the 'fall doll' in a restoration of [male] consensus.[48]

That consensus was of the Frankish noble elite whom she characterised in 2006 as 'fundamentally the types required by the public duties of their time and status; tough warriors' whose 'ideas and ideals ... had much to do with honour and service and with a *masculine* [my emphasis] self-discipline that didn't always put too much stress on the sexual kind', but who nonetheless 'remodelled themselves as agents of a self-consciously Christian regime'.[49] This was a gendered understanding. She was a pioneer of women's history, but also of gender history. (Eirenic, as ever, she felt the two could 'co-exist quite comfortably'.[50]) By 2006 gender was explicit, but it was present, *avant la lettre*, much earlier. Already in Berlin in 1987, addressing the question of the 'freedom' of nuns and noble women, she immediately asked – how free were men, calling for the pursuit of 'gender-specific varieties of freedom'.[51]

In a series of articles in the 1980s and 90s her quest to understand the Carolingian aristocracy became more and more a study of their masculinity as well as their class.[52] In 1985 she showed us a Christianity willing – or at least able – to endorse noble men and their masculinity, specifically its military side, the fighting man. Her key article from 1999 presented the problems of that accommodation. Those problems were acute in the case of violence. For some men they were almost impossible to navigate when it came to that other essential of noble masculinity – the sexual activity which begat children and provided for the succession of the line. She contextualised both: the problem of violence sharpened once the legitimations of royal command for the public good were removed,

[47] J.L. Nelson, 'Bad Kingship in the Earlier Middle Ages' (1999), reprinted in *Courts, Elites and Gendered Power*, 1–26 at 25.
[48] J.L. Nelson, 'England and the Continent in the Ninth Century: IV, Bodies and Minds', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 15 (2005), 1–27 at 21.
[49] Nelson, 'Did Charlemagne have a private life?', 24.
[50] IHR Interview.
[51] J.L. Nelson, 'Commentary on the papers of J.Verdon, S.F.Wemple and M.Parisse', in Werner Affeldt (ed.), *Frauen in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter: Lebensbedingungen-Lebensnormen-Lebensformen*, Freien Universität Berlin, Feb. 1987 (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1990), 325–32 at 332.
[52] Nelson, 'Public *Histories* and Private History' (1985); J.L. Nelson, 'Ninth-century Knighthood, the evidence of Nithard' (1989), reprinted in *The Frankish World*, 75–87; J.L. Nelson, 'Monks, secular men and Masculinity, c 900' (1999), reprinted in *Courts, Elites and Gendered Power*, 121–42.

those around sex thrown into anxiety-inducing relief by the increasing definition of a celibate, monastic masculinity. The resulting anxieties were especially those of young men, presented with life choices not always their own. These issues could present rather less problematically for women. Dhuoda was happy to commend the examples of the fecund patriarchs in her advice to her son, looking 'forward to the proliferation of the family line' as all aristocrats should do – though with strictures concerning sex nonetheless.[53] The Carolingian Renaissance, as ever essentially a movement for more thorough Christianisation, constituted a challenge to noble masculinity. Most muddled through, for others there were real tensions. Recognition of these enabled Jinty to reinterpret longstanding historiographical enigmas, e.g. in the stories of King Alfred and his illnesses.[54] In this sophisticated exercise in gender history she had moved well beyond 'let us understand the Frankish nobility and what makes them tick', to subtle explorations of what made *some of them* anxious.

And it was here that she quoted in print a favourite line from Marc Bloch: 'The good historian is like the fairy-tale giant: he knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies.' She refused to leave her people as textual artefacts of clerical rhetoric. She was a historian for whom 'these texts give access to real men ... men who actually lived.'[55] People were her quarry, pursued with an empathy for individuals which was personally felt. She presents Bertrada, mother of Charlemagne, as widow and grandmother, remembering with 'joy and triumph' the realisation of her first pregnancy.[56] She had an eye for victims, with whom she visibly suffered. Wolo, the young man driven to suicide assuring his abbot as he died 'however wicked I was in other ways, I never slept with a woman';[57] the man burnt alive for sexual intercourse with a mare; Northild, the 'fall doll': all 'victims whose fate after all these centuries still distresses me.'[58] Here and elsewhere her deep humanity led her to break the wall of academic writing and its conventions.

'The Church and Childhood' was the theme she chose for her presidency of the Ecclesiastical History Society. It was a very personal one. The choice was discussed at the October 1993 meeting, where, as Katy Cubitt reports, the minutes under 'Any Other

[53] Nelson, 'Monks, secular men and Masculinity, 127.
[54] Nelson, 'Monks, secular men and Masculinity', 135–8. Earlier discussion of this in J.L.Nelson, 'Wealth and Wisdom: the politics of Alfred the Great' (1986), reprinted in *Rulers and Ruling Families*, 31–52 at 33–4 and *eadem*, 'Waiting for Alfred', *Early Medieval Europe,* 7:1 (1998), 115–24 at 122–3
[55] Nelson, 'Monks, secular men and Masculinity', 138.
[56] J.L. Nelson, 'Bertrada', in Matthias Becher & Jörg Jarnut (eds), *Der Dynastiewechsel von 751* (Münster: Scriptorium, 2004), 93–108 at 100.
[57] Nelson, 'Monks, secular men and Masculinity', 133 – and cf. J.L. Nelson, 'Parents, Children and the Church in the Earlier Middle Ages', in Diana Wood (ed.), *The Church and Childhood* (*Studies in Church History*, 31*;* Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 81–114 at 114.
[58] Nelson, 'Bodies and Minds', 21.

Business' contain 'the simple record that the Committee had unanimously agreed to the President's proposal that a collection for the Save the Children's Fund should be taken at its winter conference.' Her Presidential address was a bravura performance. Beginning with news headlines including restrictions on the physical punishment of children and the Bulger murder, she ranged across the Church's ideas of childhood, with all their ambiguities if not outright contradictions, focusing on areas where church, parents and society interacted: baptism and godparenthood, and oblation – the gift of children to churches. Oblates from Frankish families to their family monasteries might be gifts, expressing family identity, like godchildren part of family strategies; but they were also individuals 'struggling to find their own identity'. At least some early medieval children found themselves trapped in the meeting of parental and ecclesiastical authority, becoming 'tragedies that were all its [the early middle ages'] own'. [59] All signalled, in Katy's words, 'her commitment, both as a historian and as a person, to the vulnerable and under-represented members of society'.

That abiding interest in individuals crops up in unlikely places. It fuelled her impatience with a periodisation which separated off the early middle ages and allowed historians to patronise or condescend to its people, something on which she took Richard Southern to task. She quotes his view of Charlemagne's comments on a theological work as 'most commonplace' and appearing with 'tedious reiteration', and his judgement of King Alfred's famous translations as 'commonplace in content', remarking rather acidly that it was well for Charles that he was not a member of Southern's seminars – a B$^{=}$ student in that company.[60] Her own assessments of both Charles and Alfred were far more generous. Her quest for the people of the past permitted imaginative interpretation – particularly crucial for work on women's history and other groups with little or no voice in the historical record – though always in the context of her unrivalled knowledge of the primary and secondary material. Even 'sailing close to the imaginative wind and certainly into the eye of the speculative storm' was justified in order to 'make the acquaintance of my subject'.[61]

That subject was finally Charlemagne – not one of the 'vulnerable' and certainly not one of the 'under-represented' – in her second and longest book, *King and Emperor: A New Life of Charlemagne*.[62] Far more than *Charles the Bald*, *King and Emperor* is biography, a 'Life' made possible due to the rich and varied sources for Charles' reign. Jinty squeezed these with typical skill and imagination. She was convinced it was

[59] Nelson, 'Parents, Children and the Church', 114.
[60] J.L. Nelson, 'Liturgy or Law: Misconceived Alternatives', in Stephen Baxter, Catherine Karkov, Janet L. Nelson & David Pelteret (eds), *Early Medieval Studies in memory of Patrick Wormald* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 433–47 at 435–6; and cf. 'Bodies and Minds', 16 n. 58.
[61] Nelson, 'Did Charlemagne have a private life?', 16.
[62] J.L. Nelson, *King and Emperor. A New Life of Charlemagne* (London: Allen Lane, 2019).

possible to write the biography of an early medieval person; indeed it was necessary – distance in time did not mean their diminished individual agency. It was critical to reveal evolution over the lifecycle in response to experience; to see a life in context, to build up layers of context. She would pursue him as a man, with an 'interior and domestic life', not as some representative of his times; seeking out anecdotes which would illuminate 'his childhood, his immediate family, his sexual life, his spirituality'.[63] Biography was her response to post-modernism. All is not discourse, layers of fictions. We can capture glimpses of 'the living man'; we can make a 'plausible reconstruction of reality'. The use of vignettes would show 'recurring themes of memory, identity, subjectivity and intentionality'. No one who reads the biography will forget the story of how Charles lost his first milk tooth.

The biography eschews hindsight. It is a detailed, chronological study in which Charles ages and changes. It is a story oriented ruthlessly on a human being, in whose life family, women and geographical place move centre stage. One of the successes of the work is how familiar stories, like the rise of the Carolingians and the reign of his father Pippin, appear when the focus is what Charles sees, hears, might have known. She even encourages us to hear his voice; angry, exasperated, haranguing, urgent and demanding – the ideas sometimes tumbling from his lips, sometimes an interrogative barrage – always a ruler. She brings us close to the man: an eldest and much wanted child, confident, affirmed by those around him, sociable, joking – who 'felt good in his own skin'[64] – deeply pious in his own sense of a man and family chosen by God. If Jinty displays particular sympathies, it is with the young Charles, and the aging one. This is the work of an aging Jinty, by now a grandmother. As with her late work on Bertrada,[65] Charles's mother, is there an element of self-identification? Jinty may have rejected biography as a 'great man' pursuit of history, but she leaves us in no doubt of her admiration for the 'exceptional' 'extraordinary' man about whom she writes.[66]

Perhaps her quest for empathetic understanding coupled to that admiration occasionally brings her close to pulling back from judgement. At the beginning of his reign Charles took great pains to gain control of his dead brother's young sons. They disappeared without trace, almost certainly murdered. In her *History Workshop Journal* article, this showed a 'ruthlessness exceptional even in an age of bloody intra-familial

[63] Nelson, 'Charlemagne the Man' and 'Writing Early Medieval Biography' – between them an excellent introduction to the finished work.
[64] Nelson, *King and Emperor*, p. 491.
[65] Nelson, 'Bertrada', and J.L.Nelson, 'Family structures and gendered power in early medieval kingdoms: the case of Charlemagne's mother', in Giulia Calvi (ed.), *Women Rulers in Europe: Agency, Practice and Representation of Political Powers (XII-XVIII),* (*EUI Working Paper HEC No. 2008/2,* 2008), 27–44.
[66] Nelson, *King and Emperor*: 'An extraordinary man … by any standards extraordinary', p. 1; 'this exceptional man', p. 493.

conflict'.[67] But in 2019, as in her 2013 [published 2014] Raleigh Lecture, there is less judgement and more anthropological parallels: 'their fates were the fates of the offspring of junior branches in dynastic states ... Nephews were the classic rivals, and victims, of paternal uncles. "The history of monarchy is stained with the blood of close kin."' Most explicitly in 2014, 'Observing this is not to condemn but to understand.'[68] Yet she was clearly troubled, as she suggests Charles may have been: 'For the man that wears the crown, there are sleepless nights.' And she returns to these events in relation to the division of 806, when Charles himself forbade his sons to put to death any of their sons (his grandsons), or to mutilate, blind or tonsure them without lawful trial and inquiry' – referring specifically to the avuncular as well as paternal relationships between these generations.[69] Jinty sees memories of 772 here, a 'dreadful warning about uncles and nephews', even 'a very belated flicker of guilty conscience'. Punches pulled, perhaps, but also a very Jinty struggle for understanding and a reminder to read across her extensive oeuvre. By contrast her frank recognition of the impact of Charlemagne's long Saxon wars, exhibiting the 'pathological vocabulary of anger', 'the pathological devastation and burnings', the deportations, the crushing of Saxon identity, called forth her trenchant judgement.[70]

There were paradoxes and contradictions in Charles which she admits and refuses to resolve. In so many ways the biography is a great achievement and a worthy culmination of her life's work.

Like the themes of her writing, her approaches and methods remained consistent over a long career. She took lifelong inspiration from anthropology and the social sciences. These were least in evidence in her thesis, but were already powerful influences by the time she reached London. Wendy Davies' first memory of her is of 'Christopher Holdsworth telling me about this very clever young woman who had come to King's, who knew about anthropology'. It informed her understanding of ritual and its power, fuelling her break with the interpretations of her supervisor, Walter Ullmann.[71] The London academic environment, where she was able to attend the seminars of someone like Maurice Bloch at the LSE, undoubtedly nourished it. She rightly considered her study of assemblies, where the 'consensus politics' of Carolingian kings and aristocrats was constructed and practised, as one of her major contributions.[72] In one of her earliest

[67] Nelson, 'Writing Early Medieval Biography', 132.
[68] Nelson, *King and Emperor*, p. 135, even clearer in the Raleigh Lecture, J.L. Nelson, 'Charlemagne and Europe', 135.
[69] Nelson, *King and Emperor*, pp. 434–5, and on father/son and uncle/nephew J.L.Nelson, 'Charlemagne – *pater optimus*?' (2002), reprinted in *Courts, Elites and Gendered Power*, 22–37, 269–70.
[70] Nelson, *King and Emperor*, pp. 322–6.
[71] Nelson, 'Inauguration Rituals' (1977)), and compare I.N. Wood, in Alice Rio *et al.*, 'Jinty Nelson in Thirteen Articles', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 7th ser., 3 (2025), 301–25 at 304–5.
[72] Nelson, *King and Emperor*, p. 479, n. 105.

discussions of this, she wrote of 'that consensus – achieved through political processes of persuasion and brokerage, of authority as well as power', citing what the French anthropologist Balandier 'has called ... "the dialectic of contestation and conformity".'[73] In her biography of Charlemagne, she borrowed the idea of him 'seeing like a state' to understand Charlemagne's ultimately unsuccessful canal project,[74] and made Charlemagne himself a Weberian 'pointsman', or 'signalman', showing continuity in principle and policy, but also a 'capacity to switch ideas in new directions in response to conjunctures'.[75] To understand Charles and his contemporaries historians had to work 'like anthropologists, treating another culture on its own terms, thinking across cultures, comparatively and historically.'[76]

If that was right for Jinty, it was right for others. Mayke de Jong remembers the early stages of the *Transformation of the Roman World* group led by Jinty and Frans Theuws in the mid 1990s.

> Our discussions soon became a seminar run by Frans and Jinty. We were gently but firmly corrected. A few of the archaeologists, including our group leader, were heavily into explanatory models daringly but loosely drawn from cultural anthropology, while some of the historians were still stuck in an antiquated ethnography ... Before we knew it, Jinty sent us on a crash course of the anthropologists we had failed to read, like Max Gluckmann and Maurice Bloch.

She was, however, fundamentally a historian, eclectic in her lightly deployed theoretical toolkit, but rooted in the discipline's rigorous methods of reading and understanding sources. The exemplum, the anecdote, the document – all subjected to close reading, as fully contextualised as possible – were central. It was crucial to 'read as they would have read', with an understanding of the 'languages [which] existed, with different registers and applications detectable – and different dialects audible – in different settings.'[77] All this is very clear in her papers for the Bucknell group; it was a central part of that group's own methodology. It was one she made her own.

The telling details, the arresting metaphor are leitmotivs. When Charles was in Rome in 774 he placed a document concerning his agreements with the papacy on the tomb of St Peter, where he left it. 'In leaving the document there, Charles manifested his trust in Peter's power to protect him and his people more securely than ever ... The *confessio* of St Peter was, as it were, like a "numinous oven", whence [as in 770] a letter emerged charged

[73] Nelson, 'Legislation and Consensus in the reign of Charles the Bald', 107.
[74] I.e. ideas of the political anthropologist James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How certain schemes to improve the Human Condition have Failed* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1998), Nelson, *King and Emperor,* pp. 295–6.
[75] Nelson, *King and Emperor*, pp. 292, 285.
[76] Nelson, 'Charlemagne and Europe', 146.
[77] Nelson, 'The settings of the gift in the reign of Charlemagne', 117.

with holy power. The document left in the *confessio* was "like a battery on permanent charge".'[78] She captures the materiality of Charles's religion. She also reveals some of her own conceptions of power: requiring constant charging; its charging points including objects and places, its energy tapped and released by belief. The *Confessio* was an oven baking-in power, the palace a 'junction box' in its circuit.[79] Her metaphors are telling, power not added and subtracted in a simple zero-sum game, but moving and dynamic.

Jinty delighted in the details which anchored history firmly into lived experience, earthed it in embodied life. Thousands might attend the largest assemblies. This posed human problems – the 'presence of large numbers of young men, touchy, aggressive, ambitious, with their own sense of humour and taste for horseplay';[80] but also huge logistical ones – grooming, feeding so many horses, the resultant mountains of dung to be cleared. Jinty, like the Franks, had an eye for horses. They, and how they were ridden, were markers of status and gender. The role of queens included responsibility for gifts – but never gifts of horses.[81] Alcuin, an Englishman at the court of Charles, sent a saddle to the Archbishop of Canterbury, so that he could ride as 'pastors of churches are accustomed [to do] ... in this part of the world [i.e. Francia]'.[82] In the attached note, she clarifies that this means side-saddle, and indicates a 'distinct masculinity anticipating eleventh-century reform ideas.' (A throw-away which serves as a reminder always to read Jinty's notes!) Ways of riding marked out English churchmen, as did drinking beer and eating porridge – Alcuin, a Northerner, was ribbed at court about both.

Resources mattered. In her fully worked out accounts of Carolingian rule and how it worked there is full attention to them.[83] In 1979 discussing the role of the church in Charles the Bald's reign, she agreed with Wallace-Hadrill that books 'produced in ecclesiastical centres' meant a lot to a king like Charles, but 'land and money, bed and breakfast meant even more'. But she also denied the idea that the king became too reliant on bishops and abbots, or conversely that he 'ruined the churches' material base'. Behind both judgements lurks an old-established historiography of opposition between 'church' and 'state' which, as we have seen, Jinty resolutely refused. Rather she presented their relationship and its results as not so much a cake, fixed in size whatever its respective shares, but 'a healthy cow which you can not only milk without killing, but whose production you can greatly increase if you improve its feed'.[84]

[78] Nelson, *King and Emperor*, pp. 139–40. Her own internal references here are to Nelson, 'Charlemagne the Man', 31.
[79] Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, p. 260 apropos the late 9th century when it ceased to function as such.
[80] Nelson, 'The Frankish Kingdoms, 814–898: the West', 420.
[81] Nelson, 'The settings of the gift', 144.
[82] Nelson, 'Bodies and Minds', 5–6 and n. 22.
[83] See e.g.'The Bases of Power', in Nelson, 'The Frankish Kingdoms, 814–898: the West', 385–98, and *Charles the Bald* (1992), where the first substantive chapter is 'The Carolingian economy and the state'.
[84] J.L. Nelson, 'Charles the Bald and the Church in town and countryside' (1979), reprinted in *Politics and*

The Jinty of such statements could be described as loosely '*marxisante*' – a term she used in her IHR interview to describe the founders of the journal *Past and Present*, on whose editorial board she sat. In a review of recent work on Frankish history published in 1987 she called for more economic and social history – more on peasants and their relation to real power, on how workers were 'exploited', a significant choice of word.[85] In her Bucknell essay on 'Disputes', referenced in this same review, peasants were central. Here was no cosy world of consensus but a justice of the powerful in their own interests. Free peasants – little men, and women – used court procedures and often showed considerable understanding of them, but rarely won. Justice was firmly situated within local society and its pressures.[86] She would reprise the peasants from this first Bucknell paper in one of her Royal Historical Society presidential lectures: very aware of their rightful claims, as shown in the lengths to which they went, including the physical, geographical journeys they were ready to undertake, to make those claims. She was self-consciously 'repair[ing] an omission of the previous two lectures'.[87]

That omission was not, however, confined to her presidential lectures. Peasants and the economy were not the areas of her major contributions, nor was *marxisante* history. By the end – and long before – she was a cultural historian. In 2007, in an article on periodisation addressed to a wider public in *History Workshop Journal*, she took issue with Bryan Ward-Perkins' view of Late Antiquity, that 'most people, like people today ... lived in the material world', that what mattered to them was their standard of living. Jinty challenged this:

> This may look self-evidently true; yet the common sense, and the strategies of practical coping, of 'most people' can't be understood apart from the same people's mental and spiritual lives. The recent history of Central and Eastern Europe, not to mention other Continents and times, suggests that religion matters to 'most people' every bit as much as economics, not least in times of great change.[88]

Her 1987 review had ended with a call for students' access to the sources, and thus for translations. Languages, the need for them and the impact of decline in their teaching, especially in state schools, was something which concerned her throughout her life. She chaired the British Academy Working Group on the state of language learning and its impact on UK Higher Education, whose report – *Language Matters* – was published in 2009.[89] In 2011, commenting on her analysis of the Leeds International Medieval

Ritual, 75–90 at 89.

[85] Nelson, 'Rewriting the history of the Franks', 178–9.

[86] Nelson, 'Dispute Settlement in Carolingian West Francia'.

[87] J.L. Nelson, 'England and the Continent in the Ninth Century: III, Rights and Rituals', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 14 (2004), 1–24 at 2.

[88] J.L. Nelson, 'The Dark Ages', *History Workshop Journal*, 63:1 (2007), 191–201 at 196–7.

[89] British Academy, *Language Matters: A position paper* (2009), https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/

Congress, and thus especially of postgraduates, she saw evidence of decline alongside bright spots, particularly associated with the lack of languages and the isolating effects this had on English/Anglolexic postgraduates.[90] Without languages and the wider perspectives that skill brought, history was 'impoverished'. She insisted that her own research students learn German. It was 'tough but would pay off. There is so much excellent work in German – on every area of History – and German historians loved to debate.'[91] In this same interview she regretted the growing insularity especially of English history, again attributed to lack of languages especially German. This is Jinty the committed European, for whom Brexit was a disaster. It is also Jinty the teacher, rigorous but also realistic and sympathetic. She was ready to translate texts for her own undergraduates. Her translation of the *Annals of St-Bertin*, later published with excellent annotation, was the result.[92]

Teacher, mentor, colleague

Jinty's formal teaching career was spent entirely at King's, at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. During that time she supervised 32 PhDs to completion, and taught hundreds of undergraduate and MA students. Her two Special Subjects were taught and designed jointly with colleagues from the wider University of London: 'Charles the Bald and Alfred' with John Gillingham, 'Charlemagne' with Paul Fouracre. Joint teaching, with the inevitable additional discussion, debate, even differences of opinions – unsurprisingly students loved those – were typical of the collaborative work which also distinguished and nourished her research. Teaching and research were for her inseparable. It is no accident that her two full-length books paralleled her Special Subjects. 'Teaching constantly generates the questions and discussions and conversations out of which your own work benefits. And then your own work comes straight back into the teaching room to be batted around by the students.'[93] Her written style, open-ended, discursive, often informal almost conversational, echoes the classroom as much as the academic seminar. Her career was the embodiment of the interaction of teaching and research which is the ideal of British Higher Education.

documents/201/Languages-Matter-Position-Paper_0.pdf

[90] J.L. Nelson, 'Medieval History in the UK in 2011, A Health Check', *History Workshop Journal,* 72:1 (2011), 271–4.

[91] IHR interview.

[92] *The Annals of St-Bertin. Ninth-Century Histories, I*, trans. and annotated J.L. Nelson (Manchester, 1991).

[93] IHR interview.

Colleagues remarked on the sense of joint ownership she fostered, on the value placed on students and their contributions, judgements echoed by the students themselves. David Carpenter, who taught the MA with her, notes

> What was striking was the way she treated everyone equally, put everyone on the same level, as though we were involved in some joint exploration of the topic. Every comment from a student was valued, even the most jejeune. No one was ever put down. A favourite Jinty response was 'good, good, excellent, now how can we take that further?' She would then show how, while at the same time giving the impression that really this was what the student was thinking all along.

Such sentiments were echoed by students themselves: 'I always felt that my ideas and opinions were respected and that I was treated as an equal.'[94] Paul Fouracre, who also taught with her, could see both sides of that approach: 'my experience in the Special Subject was Jinty would always try to draw the answer from the students in discussion, which invested them in the subject. Brilliant, but painfully slow.'

Both undergraduate and especially postgraduate students note the degree of freedom she gave them, the lack of control and detailed direction or prescription. This was almost certainly linked to her own experience as a postgraduate with Walter Ullmann, who, in her words, 'had already a fairly clear notion of this project as it would be when completed, before any particular student ever started it.'[95] This hands-off approach was, however, in the context of high expectations of students, exacting standards, and a readiness to criticise. The bibliography for her comparative Special Subject on Charles the Bald and Alfred – as preserved by Frances Andrews for 1983–4 – had numerous sources in Latin, though with the occasional nod to linguistic challenge by suggesting a French translation.

Her kindness to students was legendary. As Louise Wilkinson told me, 'she even posted me a new book that had arrived with her to my house in Hertfordshire quite unprompted – just so that I could use it for my essay ... I was a home student who commuted to save costs, so this was very kind.' Many of them, like Louise, became academics. Among them Frances Andrews, whose memories of Jinty included her 'being the person who sent postcards to congratulate people on their publications (me included, 15 years after I had stopped being her student as an undergraduate, and certainly not just me).' It is no surprise that so many students, undergraduate and postgraduate, remained lifelong friends.

I was personally struck by another comment from Louise, that 'at the bottom of my queenship essay (early 1990s) is the comment – "We'll discuss Pauline Stafford's claim that the high-profile roles of queens were specific to the earlier period and changed from

[94] Sarah Fairier, personal communication.
[95] IHR Interview.

the twelfth century on."' I noted 'claim'. I can be pretty certain that, given Jinty's commitment to rigorous debate, there would have been no easy ride for friends' work in the resulting seminar.

There is an anecdote in her Charlemagne biography about Charles in later years. She imagines him, as he walked round the palace, dropping in on a group of students discussing some knotty questions like 'why do I love quarrelling', or 'Does a woman mean death'. He listens sympathetically and is 'heard to mutter "Bene"'.[96] It was, I must admit, one of those points in her biography when I wondered whether the imaginative reconstruction of a benevolent and encouraging Charles had crossed a bridge too far. Here empathy may reveal more than a hint of self-identification.

Her teaching was King's- and London-based, but her formal and especially informal pedagogy extended far beyond. Postgraduates and young scholars were her special concern. In the 1990s she taught summer sessions for postgraduates at the Central European University in Budapest. She read draft papers and chapters not only for fellow scholars, but for their students, and as Mayke De Jong informed me, 'my post-grad students never got a refusal from her, however busy she was.' She was always keen to meet and talk to PhD students when she visited institutions whether as President of the Royal Historical Society, or as a speaker – or at the annual Leeds International Medieval Congress. The IMC is a place where hundreds of postgraduates from across the world gather. Jinty was one of its most regular attendees and took all the opportunities it provided for intellectual exchange and sociability – including its more dangerous ones. In its earlier days the IMC operated across split sites, with a shuttle bus linking them. The pedestrian route involved braving the Leeds Outer Ring Road – a test of courage as well as agility. Jinty always insisted on walking, because, as she said, this was a way to meet and chat with young people. There must be many former PGRs whose memories of Leeds include dodging the traffic while explaining the details of their work to an eminent, but always interested, professor.

Support and mentoring for fellow scholars also reached out beyond London, as I realised when gathering information for this obituary. A remarkable number of people – men, but in particular women – contacted me to say how important she had been at some critical point in their lives and especially their academic careers. One indication of her importance in so many careers was her frequent appearance as a referee. By the 1990s there must have been few posts in Anglophone medieval history, and very few in early medieval history, where she did not appear as a referee for one candidate at least. Katy Cubitt remembers one post 'where I think she wrote references for the whole short list'. Reading them must have been a test of hermeneutic skill. On a visit to St Andrews, as Simon MacLean told me, Jinty had a conversation with a colleague, not a medieval

[96] Nelson, *King and Emperor*, p. 448.

historian, 'about mentoring and supervising, and looking after your students', which 'stuck with her and had influenced how she still thinks about her work and her responsibilities as a teacher'. In Simon's words, 'I guess in the end those are the things that remain most important – the things you learn from someone like Jinty, from passing conversation, and from humane example.' This sort of informal support and influence is rarely captured; but it was an essential part of who Jinty was, and of a contribution which went so much further than the list of students supervised or public positions filled.

On her home territory at King's, her informal influence grew over the years.

> Academics and administrators consulted her, beyond her department and School as well as within them, not only because she had seniority (having been in the College for decades and being a senior professor) but also because she was seen as wise, focused on matters academic, and devoid of any 'axe to grind'.[97]

This is Jinty the academic elder and stateswoman, from late in the lifecycle. She herself, as a writer of biography, would insist on attention to that cycle's stages and to the changes across it.

Jinty

Her sister Christine remembers Jinty as a child. 'She was full of fun, a bit of a tomboy, climbing trees or taking the lead role in many games involving pirates, cowboys or Highland clans.' Holidays included stays with her mother's sister and family in Dumfries. Her aunt and uncle were keen local historians and fostered Jinty's already established love of history with visits to local castles where she explored for hours. The name by which she was always known went back to these early years, and was, typically, her own choice. 'After being called names by some children at primary school Jinty had decided that before arriving at Keswick Grammar school she would give herself a new nickname. She chose Jinty and thus became Jinty for the rest of her life.' Her name was certainly not neutral territory. She reprimanded me on one occasion, and Jinty could do reprimand, for calling her 'Janet Nelson' in print. 'I'm either Jinty or J.L. Nelson' – that 'L' recalling the 'Laughland' of her mother's maiden name. Both 'Jinty' and 'Laughland' spoke to her self-identity as Scottish. Frances Andrews recalls how, 'she always spoke about how much she felt attached, at home, when in Scotland.' Those 'games of Highland clans', Christine remembers, involved 'dressing up in kilts, or other tartan items, and fighting off other clans or the English troops … Rob Roy MacGregor was the image we were trying for.' Even as a child 'she was very proud of being Scottish, though her

[97] Rick Trainor, personal communication.

cousins called her a Sassenach.' One can imagine how a would-be Rob Roy MacGregor received that.

Her lifelong friend and fellow student, Jan Marsh recalls her at Cambridge: 'very modest, even shy but already special, with the sharpest mind and warmest heart. One fellow student, Lisa Ristic from [then] Yugoslavia was blind and Jinty joined others in helping Lisa to manage daily and scholarly tasks.' She already stood out academically, and was chosen to represent Newnham on *University Challenge*, alongside Miriam Margolyes among others. Jan again, 'In her third year she was elected Senior Student, representing the undergraduate body. I recall ... her end of year speech during Formal Hall when she brought in both her Scottish identity and her feminist values – *avant la lettre* – by quoting Robert Burns, with his "toast to the lassies".' She was plainly destined for an academic career, but as Jan adds 'scholarship and social responsibility were ... [already] prefigured.' Scottish, feminist, socialist – and historian, determined and warm-hearted: key aspects of Jinty's identity had deep roots.

Family was always important to her, though combining career and motherhood was a challenge. She was very aware of the choices earlier generations of women had made – or been forced to make – between the two; those who taught her and, closer to home, her own mother. In her essay on anticipating Grandmotherhood, Jinty reflected on the 'women who'd taught me, inspirationally'.[98] In the context of this very frank assessment of the tensions between work and family, she also remembered that 'none of them had children'. Like others in these early days of Second-wave feminism she refused to make that choice. 'My generation wanted it both ways. We would have career and children.'[99] There were few role models for this in the 1970s, neither her maternal grandmother, nor her own mother who had had to abandon her potential career when she married. Jinty was frankly ambitious, was convinced she would never get a job again if she stopped work – and saw herself, at least by 2000, as breaking out of what she perceived as 'a generations-old cycle of maternal frustration'. It was, however, a decision which came with its own costs and trade-offs, ones for which feminism in the 1970s, or later, has still found no simple answer. The arrival of her grandchildren in the 2000s was a major event in her life and a source of great joy. She committed to looking after them one day a week. Thursdays became sacrosanct.

David Carpenter witnessed Jinty at King's in the late 1980s, part of the long-running Allen Brown-Jinty double act. This was aimed at new first years, who had to be persuaded to choose a medieval course, no longer mandatory in the curriculum. Allen Brown insisted on the necessity of understanding the medieval past to understanding the present. To be deprived of that was to be 'deprived of their birth right.' In some years he

[98] J.L. Nelson, 'Contemplating grandmotherhood', in Geoff Dench (ed.), *Grandmothers of the Revolution* (London: Hera Trust with Institute of Community Studies, 2000), 187–94 at 192.
[99] Nelson, 'Contemplating grandmotherhood', 192.

appeared with his cavalry sword. 'He concluded with a great shout "damned be those who know no medieval history", in earlier years "damned be *men* who know no medieval history".' Follow that, one might say. Jinty did, with a very different message, showing how 'approaches had transformed the study of the medieval past – women's history, gender, anthropology, *Annales*, Past & Present and so on. Medieval history was made to sound fresh, exciting, cutting edge.' Her influence on students was already impressive, the cutting edge of research here balancing the steel of the sword. There are times when one regrets the lack of recordings of such events.

David remembers the Jinty of the late 1980s onwards as ambitious and competitive; very pleased at her own election as FBA, at being the first woman Royal Historical Society President and at her Dameship – the latter especially surprising in a lifelong socialist and radical. As he notes, 'I think her ambition was sharpened by her early treatment, regarded for so long in the Department as "little Jinty".' Stuart Airlie remembers 'a conference in Europe [where] I once complained to Jinty about the relentless competitiveness of many academics. She looked right into my eyes and said, "But Stuart, it *is* a competition." The way she said this was very serious, almost solemnly intoning an iron law. I was very struck by this. Another angle on how driven she was.' Jinty will always be remembered for her humanity. But it is important not to make her too 'nice', especially not in any way saccharine.

In her later years many came to know her as a public figure in the profession, most notably as President of the RHS, and in that capacity addressing ministers, championing the subject, and Humanities more widely. There was a steely core to Jinty, a natural but very real authority. That small, wiry figure was perfectly willing and able to call Ministers of State to account – when, for example, they misjudged the nature and role of Humanities, especially History, education. Hers was the authority of the consummate professional and great historian.

At that date Council met around a large table, almost filling a room surrounded by bookshelves above which were portraits of former presidents – a gallery of besuited males. As first woman President her election and tenure, the sight of her at the top of that table, were of huge symbolic significance. A small, wiry figure – she usually dressed in shirt, jeans and gilet, perhaps plus beret. She did realise that being President of the RHS called for a more formal image, at least for its public activity. One of the first things I recall her doing was buying a trouser suit. Tartan trews were added later. She still, however, continued to cut her own hair. No-one could accuse her of fashion-consciousness. But the clothes expressed so much: her formation as a Second-wave feminist; the jaunty beret of a Francophile, indeed Europhile; pride in her Scottish ancestry, her unmaterialistic socialism – though she was no puritan, she liked a glass of good white Burgundy. It was the garb of a member of the History Workshop Collective, with its journal of 'Socialist and Feminist Historians', of the founder member of the Women's History

Seminar and the lifelong supporter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

That was a powerful backstory for a President of the RHS – and she brought all this with her, alongside her gender and her legendary warmth. It affected what she did as President, and how she did it. In the words of her successor, Martin Daunton, she made the Society 'truly sociable'. Peter Mandler, her Honorary Secretary, comments that she was in some ways an unlikely choice, 'a self-positioned rebel, or at least an outsider', yet in fact a very shrewd one.

> Her scepticism about institutions and bureaucracies was often warranted; it convinced ordinary jobbing historians that she was on their side; and at the same time her very strong and principled sense of civic duty meant that she was quite able to swallow her reservations in the name of progress. Under her leadership the Society gained in authority both amongst rank-and-file historians and in the corridors of power.

Being President also did things for her. The Presidency came with a view of the centrality of History as a discipline, an awareness of the Society's long and venerable past, and the status and potential that gave. In her case it came with the legacy of two previous great presidents – Rees Davies and Peter Marshall, both Fellows of the British Academy, both committed to a broader role for the Society. Jinty was very conscious of all this. She became increasingly aware of the importance of the subject as a whole, its health and needs. Jinty was, of course, always interested in History beyond her own research areas. There was no Pauline conversion in that sense on the way to the Council Chamber. But the Presidency affected her. People fill roles, but roles can also expand them.

She worked to broaden the Fellowship; she followed Rees and Peter in taking Council and its meetings out of London, including into the new universities. She became a champion of the subject and its public defence, and especially of the teaching of History, the key to its survival; its teaching across the whole range of Higher Education and in schools.

Her role as President of the RHS took her out into the historical community. She was positive about university expansion and its desirability: what 'some traditionalists deplore as dumbing down' was an 'opening out, a bridging of an anxiety-provoking gap – not a problem but a whole set of solutions', a democratisation of cultural and intellectual life, 'an academic public sphere'.[100] She took an optimistic view, arguing that History could flourish even in small, remote units. 'I'm one of those that believes that this expansion has not come, and need never come, at the cost of excellence, particularly not research excellence.'[101] The woman who had spent her entire career within the Golden Triangle became an advocate for History wherever it was practised.

[100] J.L. Nelson, 'Organic Intellectuals in the Dark Ages', *History Workshop Journal*, 66 (2008), 1–17 at 1 (The Raphael Samuel Memorial Lecture, 2005).
[101] IHR Interview

Last years

One of Jinty's last works returned to Archbishop Hincmar, an old companion from one of her earliest articles – now discussed as a historian. In old age he invoked his own life-cycle as the source of his qualifications: 'his personality, his abiding self-confidence enhanced by age and experience'.[102] It's tempting to hear Jinty's own self-reflection here, perhaps even aware of change in herself.

A Hincmarian old age was not to be hers. The advance of Alzheimer's changed her last years. Some time before her death her academic activity ceased completely. This was a very deliberate and conscious decision. She would repeatedly stress that 'all that has gone'. Her political interests continued. The old socialist and life-long – if critical – supporter of the Labour Party still sent letters to the *Guardian*; one, as I recall, addressed personally to Polly Toynbee and frankly – and typically – speaking about her Alzheimer's diagnosis. Gardening became more of an interest – if somewhat undiscerning when it came to pulling up plants according to Wendy Davies. Music remained a mainstay. She was still playing Schubert until the last months of her life. Family – her children, grandchildren, and her sister's family – engrossed her, and, in turn, were her constant support.

As all those who knew her in those last years insist, the essential Jinty remained; her warmth, her empathy – her interest in castles. Two books over which she pored in her last months were on English, and, of course, Scottish castles. Conversation, so long the life-blood of her relationships, became harder and harder. But as her sister Christine recalls: 'she changed but never lost that essence of Jinty. If she was lost for words she always had a smile and a wink!'

There was a Jinty, formally recognised as a great historian, active across a range of professional activities. There was a Jinty, warm, approachable, with a gift for friendship, always so interested in, so focused on whoever she was with, possessed of the 'Jinty magic'. After her death there were events at the Institute of Historical Research and at King's to celebrate her and her work. On both occasions the rooms were crowded out by friends, colleagues, students – categories which in her case so often overlapped. They were witness to the fact that the two Jintys were inseparable. The smile and wink have gone. But what will endure, even to those who never knew her, is the inimitable prose style, so personal, even idiosyncratic, precise but rich in its use of the English language; and a body of work which transmits the practice as well as the achievement of a historian who was humane, other-person-centred and collaborative.

[102] J.L. Nelson, 'Hincmar's life in his historical writings', in Rachel Stone & Charles West (eds), *Hincmar of Rheims: Life and Work* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 44–59 at 54–5.

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Note on the author: Pauline Stafford was Professor of Medieval History at the University of Liverpool, now Professor Emerita. She is an Honorary Vice-President of the Royal Historical Society.

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