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Dr Robin Mundill, 1958–2015

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In Memoriam Dr Robin Mundill, 1958–2015

Over the course of the last three decades there has been a great upsurge in scholarship relating to the Jewish communities of medieval England. These advances have, in large part, been spearheaded by a vanguard of exceptional historians, each specializing in different aspects of the field. As far as Edwardian Jewry are concerned, the work of Robin Mundill has for ever changed our understanding of the years leading up to, and culminating in, the expulsion of 1290. Having completed his Ph.D. at St. Andrews in 1987, Robin could quite easily have become what could be described as a “career academic” but instead chose a career as a teacher. Most recently, Robin worked as the head of the history department at Glenalmond College, near Perth (among his other responsibilities there). Thus, in addition to being a competent and talented historian, Robin was also a dedicated teacher, whose unique and inspirational style made the study of history an enjoyable task for those pupils who were lucky enough to be taught by him.

Perhaps Robin’s most significant scholarly output was his monograph *England’s Jewish Solution: Experiment and Expulsion, 1262–1290*, first published by Cambridge University Press in 1998 (and subsequently reprinted in paperback in 2002), which built upon the work he had completed in his doctoral thesis. The significance of *England’s Jewish Solution* was immediately recognized by the fact that it was awarded the A. S. Sigismund Diamond Prize and was described by one reviewer as “the last, well-considered word on Edward’s final solution of a so-called Jewish problem”, although, as the intervening fifteen years have demonstrated, it served to open a new chapter in debate surrounding the expulsion. A decade after his first book, Robin produced a second in the form of *The King’s Jews: Money, Massacre and Exodus in Medieval England*, published by Continuum in 2010. This second book received mixed reviews, with Robert Stacey giving a particularly harsh review while other scholars, including Anthony Bale and Joseph Shatzmiller, considered the book in a more positive light. As the reviews of Bale and Shatzmiller noted, *The King’s Jews* was an important work because it provided a highly readable yet engaging thematic summary of the Jewish experience in medieval England (coming just four

years after Richard Huscroft's equally readable chronological outline of medieval England's Jews, the two complement each other well). It is a testament to Robin's passion for medieval England's Jewish communities that in his final weeks, when he was already ill, he completed the first draft of a third book (his last great academic project). "In the Islands of the Sea – a selection of Medieval Anglo-Jewish documents 1066–1290" was intended to continue where Joseph Jacobs's anthology concluded a century ago (despite the title, the majority of the Robin's documents were related to the thirteenth century). With this book, Robin aimed to "provide a small but coherent working collection of original sources for lecturers, students and teachers". Although it was far from complete on Robin's death, should it be pursued to publication it would be hard to overstate the significance of this volume.

While there is not space here to recount all Robin's journal articles, which covered topics including historiography, the lead-up to the expulsion, the Jewish experience under the Edwardian government, and the entries of relevance to Anglo-Jewry in the Patent Rolls, two articles in particular should be singled out because of the way in which they challenged long accepted arguments. "Clandestine Crypto-Camouflaged Usurer or Legal Merchant?" appeared in a special edition of *Jewish Culture and History* (2000) and "Changing Fortunes: Edwardian Anglo-Jewry and the Credit Operations in Late Thirteenth-Century England" was published in the *Haskins Society Journal* (2003). Both these articles contested that, rather than circumventing the Statute of the Jewry (1275) by hiding their usury, in reality many Jews successfully made the transition from moneylenders to commodity dealers. With his extensive understanding of the extant Edwardian source material, Robin presented a viable alternative analysis of the final fifteen years of the Jewish presence in England. While his arguments have been met with a great deal of scepticism in some quarters, such was the importance of these articles that, regardless of whether one agrees with them or not, they became landmark studies that simply cannot be ignored.

It remains only to be said that Robin was never an ivory tower academic. He was willing to help anyone who asked – whether they were colleagues who sought his wise advice, those with just a passing interest in the subject whom he succinctly helped, or those of us who are just starting our research into the history of medieval Anglo-Jewry whom Robin helped with his (seemingly) infinite patience. Moreover, Robin has been an instrumental figure in helping an academic discipline that was once

described as a “backwater” find its footing. His scholarship has inspired, and will continue to inspire, much academic debate among historians and, while Robin may not have liked the way that that debate manifested itself at times, he certainly did not object to the way that this contributed to the development of a discipline that he loved.

Dean Irwin

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Robin Mundill, 1958–2015

The Society was shocked and saddened to learn of the premature death in July of Robin Mundill, who has contributed so much to medieval Anglo-Jewish history. He was awarded a doctorate by the University of St Andrews in 1987 for his thesis, “The Jews in England, 1262–1290”, published in 1998 in *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, Fourth Series*, as *England’s Jewish Solution: Experiment and Expulsion, 1262–1290*. This, his first book, was awarded the Arthur Sigismund Diamond Prize, administered by the West London Synagogue. For the *American Historical Review*, it provided “a vigorous well-informed and comprehensive review of the historiography of the Anglo-Jewish communities of later medieval England”. As Robin acknowledged, “the decision to carry out further research and to write a book . . . was fostered by the encouragement of both Vivian Lipman and Professor Barrie Dobson.”

The book followed a series of articles in specialist journals. His first article for the Society, “Anglo-Jewry under Edward I: Credit Agents and their Clients”, was published in *Jewish Historical Studies* in 1990. “Lumbard and Son: The Businesses and Debtors of Two Jewish Moneylenders in Late Thirteenth Century England” was published in the *Jewish Quarterly Review* in 1991. This was followed by two further articles in *Jewish Historical Studies*: “The Jewish Entries from the Patent Rolls, 1270–92” (1993) and “Rabbi Elias Menahem: A Late 13th Century English Entrepreneur” four years later.

It was in 1997 that Robin and his wife Elaine, who “not only married a thesis but has also had to put up with a book ever since”, joined the staff of Glenalmond College, Perthshire. The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were the occasion for a series of conferences on the medieval Anglo-Jewry. In the first and last of these Professor Barrie

Dobson played a critical role. It was he who, as President, persuaded the Ecclesiastical Society to devote the 1991 Summer and 1992 Winter meetings to a discussion of “Christianity and Judaism”. I first met Robin in December 2000 at a colloquium held at Southampton University which led to publication. The ten contributions, including Robin’s “Edward I and the Final Phase of Anglo-Jewry”, a paper by David Hinton on “Medieval Anglo-Jewry: The Archaeological Evidence”, inspired by the York Jewish cemetery excavations, and others by Barrie Dobson, Robert Stacey, and Paul Brand, were published in 2003 as *Medieval Britain: Historical, Literary and Archaeological Perspectives* under the editorship of Patricia Skinner. A paperback edition of this book was produced in 2012.

Robin’s later articles included “Christian and Jewish Lending Patterns and Financial Dealings during the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries” in *Credit and Debt in Medieval England c. 1180–c. 1350* edited by P. R. Schofield and N. J. Mayhew (2002). His research was facilitated by the award of a School Teacher Fellowship in the Lent term of 2009, enabled by a sabbatical term from Glenalmond College. The following year his second book, *The King’s Jews: Money, Massacre and Exodus in Medieval England*, dedicated to “My girls, Elaine, Emma, Catriona and Becky”, was published.

In March 2010 a conference on “York 1190: Jews and Others in the Wake of Massacre”, to which the London and Leeds branches of the Society provided financial assistance, was held at the University of York to celebrate Professor Dobson’s distinguished contribution to the study of England’s medieval Jewry. Robin’s contribution, “The ‘Archa’ System and its Legacy after 1194”, is included in the conference transactions, *Christians and Jews in Angevin England: The York Massacre of 1190, Narratives and Contexts* edited by Sarah Rees Jones and Sethina Watson, published in 2013. The conference was the occasion of our last meeting with Robin. York was enjoying unseasonably warm weather and Robin, dressed in his customary tweed waistcoat and jacket, was uncomfortably hot but nevertheless enjoyed a convivial evening, when we sat together at dinner.

As Professor Robert Stacey wrote in May 2011, “Mundill’s great strength is his unrivalled knowledge of the financial records the royal government kept of credit transactions between Christians and Jews” (www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1077). Robin’s death is a deep loss to both the Society and medieval Anglo-Jewish history.

Joe Hillaby
Vice-President