

DOUGLAS GRAY (1930-2017): A REMEMBRANCE

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Douglas Gray, who died on 8 December 2017, was a great scholar and critic, deeply admired and loved, whose work, which encompassed an extraordinarily wide range, contributed to our understanding of individual writers and whole periods of medieval literature. This includes some of the most valuable writings there are on the Robin Hood tradition, not only in critical accounts of surviving texts but a career of work that pioneered understanding of the historical contexts and also the kinds of the interdisciplinary and cultural-anthropological approaches that have been required for serious study of Robin Hood and similar “popular” phenomena. The sheer massiveness and range of Douglas’s knowledge enabled his judgement about individual poets and texts to have a particular weight and authority, but also to strike out into new perceptions impossible to see from more narrow approaches

His 1984 essay “The Robin Hood Poems” was ahead of its time and it has proved seminal, a trail-blazer showing already what modern Robin Hood studies would encompass, especially in its combination of literary-critical, historical, political and sociocultural perspectives. Stephen Knight praised its “sweeping wisdom,” and placed it first in his *Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism*. Among many innovative arguments, it is, I think, the first study to point to the many uncanny and mysterious elements in Robin Hood texts, and to complexities of their uses of “game” and irony. Douglas showed us that the popular is emphatically not the simple. Vincent Gillespie in his May 2018 Memorial address pointed to the “social anthropologist’s eye” in Douglas’s writings from the very start of his career: “he had always been interested in the docks and daisies of songs and stories.” At the other end of his career, with multi-disciplinary Robin Hood studies fully established in the intervening period, he produced another book invaluable for Robin Hood readers, *Simple Forms: Essays on Medieval English Popular Literature* (2015), both for what it says specifically about Robin Hood texts, ballads and medieval plays, and for helping us in placing these within a larger context—that most difficult to define territory of popular medieval literature—with a brilliance, depth and range that no-one else could have brought to it. Lucidly he grapples here with what is meant by difficult concepts and the often elusive and fragmentary evidence that underlie oft-used terms such as “minstrelsy,” “folk,” performance, the oral and the written, collaborative authorship, and music, song and “game.” Douglas Gray’s expertise with writings that break out of usual class boundaries of written medieval literature appeared in the Miller, Reeve, and Cook sections of the Riverside Chaucer he was commissioned to edit and mastermind; yet his essays on Chaucer also illuminated values central to Chaucer’s “cortoisye”: essays on *pit * (1979, 1995) and “*Gentillesse*” (1987), which have been equally foundational for Chaucer students.

Douglas Gray’s plenary lecture at the Third Biennial Robin Hood Conference, held at the University of Western Ontario, was called “Everybody’s Robin Hood,” an unpretentious title typically belying its equally typical breath-taking coverage of critical, historical, political, ancient and modern perspectives. An essay based on the lecture with the same title appears in *Robin Hood: Medieval and Post-Medieval* (2005), which I edited. His *Later Medieval English Literature* (2008) contains an important wide-ranging discussion of Robin Hood considered

within the specific contexts of late medieval romance and ballad, as well as international parallels. That volume shows how convincingly Douglas presented Robin Hood entertainments and texts as major elements within later English and Scottish literary culture, a respect for them that his own earlier work had powerfully helped to make accepted. The festschrift for Douglas, *The Long Fifteenth Century* (1997) edited by Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone, includes, again invaluable for Robin Hood students, Richard Firth Green's "The Ballad and the Middle Ages." Challenging many twentieth-century critics' dismissal of the ballad and oral traditions of it, Green notes Douglas Gray's virtually lone unceasing championing of their serious importance in criticism and literary history, and further investigates ballads and popular songs in relation to Scottish and English records of oral performances, to romances, to evidence coming from outside medieval upper-class literary taste, and also to Chaucer—Douglas Gray's own sort of world of interacting critical parameters.

Douglas Gray was the first J. R. R. Tolkien Professor of English Literature and Language at Oxford. His other publications include *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (1972), *A Selection of Religious Lyrics* (1975), *Robert Henryson* (1979), *The Oxford Companion to Chaucer* (2003), *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose* (1985), and *The Phoenix and the Parrot: Skelton and the Language of Satire* (2012). He was one of the galaxy of distinguished New Zealand philologists, editors, and medieval literature critics in the second half of the twentieth century, including Norman Davis, Peter Dronke, Kenneth and Celia Sisam, and J. A. W. Bennett. All their work was marked by profound knowledge of and research into Middle English language; in Douglas this formed the basis also for uniquely insightful and socially engaged criticism.

Another way in which his life's work helped to enable modern Robin Hood studies to come into existence and flourish was that he was one of the medievalists (others include Derek Pearsall, John Scattergood, Julia Boffey, and Tony Edwards) who opened up for us during the last forty years the full glories, variety, and importance of the fifteenth century and Tudor period before Elizabeth—a time of English literature which C. S. Lewis had so inexplicably and so destructively damned as "The Drab Age" in his influential 1955 Oxford History of English Literature volume, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*. This revelation by modern scholars of the true riches and scope of the period that produced the major early extant Robin Hood texts and the Robin Hood plays gave incentives for further research by younger people and created an essential context in which the increasingly sophisticated understanding of Robin Hood of recent decades could develop.

His career exemplified interdisciplinary and boundary-challenging approaches to literature: secular and religious; humanist and "folk"; English and Scottish; Latin / French and English traditions; comic and tragic; international and British; political and pious; visual and literate cultures; the so-called "medieval" and so-called "modern," and much else. Music, including performed music, was part of his landscape for understanding Robin Hood traditions, as well as other medieval genres, including the religious lyrics. Douglas's wife Judy Gray was a musician, as well as the most extraordinarily skilful cook, and his son Nick Gray is Senior Lecturer in South Asian music at SOAS University of London and a song-writer and composer, especially with the gamelan. Music as well as books surrounded the hospitable sofas and festive table of the Gray family's low-beamed cottage, and one can see in Douglas's understanding of surviving Robin Hood texts how much he apprehended these as communal experiences, that included festive and musical performance. His writing on outlaw and ballad traditions lay within an interdisciplinary approach that marked both his teaching and his publications.

I first met Douglas in the late 60s at the postgraduate seminar he taught at Oxford on the fifteenth century. The benign, hospitable, and democratic conduct of it and the excitement of the discoveries of that century's literature were both revelations. Douglas was a role model for what and how things could be done (like many people, I've always thought Chaucer must have been like Douglas). Generous, equable, witty and liberal, Douglas and Judy Gray became to me, as to many, beloved friends. Vincent Gillespie, announcing Douglas's death, on behalf of the college of which they were both fellows, called Douglas "A deeply modest, wry, and self-effacing giant of his field." Helen Cooper's tribute at a dinner upon his retirement in 1997 said we were all dwarves on the shoulders of a giant. In modern Robin Hood studies, particularly of the earliest two centuries, we build on a foundation—intellectually multi-disciplinary, investigative, open, and also democratically-minded and collegial—in which Douglas Gray's publications, both those focussed on the hero and those that help to contextualise him, have played a vital part. In his 1984 essay Douglas had observed that despite the outlawry, praise emerges in Robin Hood poems for "gentill" qualities: "kyndenes," generosity, "courtesy," which is the opposite of mean-mindedness and also zeal for social justice, loyalty, and "the virtues of good companionship," and these were also qualities of Douglas and Judy Gray.



Douglas Gray, Summer 2017. Photo courtesy of Dr. Nick Gray.

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