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Obituary: Mary Swan, 18 December 1963–19 October 2020

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Obituaries

Mary Swan (18 December 1963–19 October 2020)

Mary Swan (18 December 1963–19 October 2020) was Director of Studies in the Leeds Institute for Medieval Studies from 1996–2011.

Mary's path into Medieval Studies began with her matriculation at Keele University in 1981, where she took a BA in French and English. Mary was thrilled by the works she encountered during these studies, among them *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. She spent her third year working in Brittany, where she made lasting friendships with two other *assistantes*. Of this group of three, one was British, one Irish (that was Mary, who always identified as Irish, and finally got the passport to prove it) and the third friend was Spanish. Between them they spoke exclusively in French all year, which is how Mary developed the fluency that characterised her use of French thereafter. She graduated with a BA in 1985.

Mary proceeded to an MA in Medieval Studies at Leeds in what was then the Centre for Medieval Studies, whose purpose was to enable interdisciplinary and cross-departmental teaching, and graduated in 1987. It was not at the time possible to study for a PhD in the Centre itself, and Mary switched to Leeds's School of English for doctoral research under the supervision of Joyce Hill. She completed her thesis, on 'Ælfric as Source: The Exploitation of Ælfric's "Catholic Homilies" from the Late Tenth to Twelfth Centuries', in 1993. By then, she had begun serving as a fixed-term lecturer in the School of English (1992–95), also adding her name to the roster of Centre for Medieval Studies staff. In the words of her partner John Anderson, 'Mary's professional direction was set, and it looks obvious in retrospect, from MA to PhD to lecturer. In fact it was never simple or easy. Every step was hard'. But in 1996 Mary was appointed to a permanent post as Director of Studies in the Centre for Medieval Studies.

The Centre's opportunity for developing offerings beyond the MA in Medieval Studies that Mary had herself taken was limited by the fact that the Centre was run, in effect, on a voluntary basis, with the cooperation of academic staff across a number of departments. Mary's appointment, as the first person to be contracted to the Centre itself, started the process of giving it a stronger presence in the University, and this more formal identity permitted it to register PhD students for doctoral research that was genuinely interdisciplinary. For Mary to put into practice her insights into how this could best be organised required determination on her part, since she had to work with staff across the Faculty of Arts to develop this distinctive approach and then to persuade the University to depart from its single-department structures for supervision and examination. It is not easy to make changes in the

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university context, especially to well-established and highly regarded ways of doing things. But Mary's personal and administrative skills bore fruit: the interdisciplinary PhD in Medieval Studies was introduced in 1999. In John's words, Mary 'was skilled at administration. Some colleagues made the mistake of thinking Mary liked admin. Not at all, she said. I do it efficiently because I don't like it'. Her approach certainly worked: her efforts meant that the University was able to attract a new type of PhD student, some bringing prestigious scholarship awards with them. Over sixty students have since graduated from the programme Mary established.

Mary also worked hard, as the Centre developed, to sustain and develop the strong sense of identity among Medieval Studies students and to foster their commitment to engaging with the Middle Ages in an interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary way. Her commitment to her students was profound. In the words of Ian Wood, another key figure in Medieval Studies at Leeds, 'her pastoral care for IMS students was absolutely extraordinary ... she went far beyond what any Director of Studies could have been expected to do'. Two testimonies, from different ends of Mary's career at Leeds, give a sense of the value Mary's students placed on her teaching. Mary Wills (BA English 1989–92) writes that

Mary was my medieval tutor for years one and two whilst she did her PhD. I still have essays beautifully and intelligently marked by her. Above all, she was kind to me — I was dreadfully homesick at Leeds, utterly overwhelmed with how big it was and how cold and northern it felt! She sensed how wretched I felt that first year and she was always extra encouraging and nice to me. I never forgot that kindness even though it was a long time ago. All university students need a kind, gentle person like Mary to look out for them.

The same sentiments are expressed regarding the later period of Mary's time at Leeds by Shona Raffle-Edwards (BA History of Art, 2006–9):

I started taking Medieval Studies modules in my first year. Mary led several of these and squeezing into her office for our lectures made me feel I had really found my place at university. She was supportive, kind and interesting, and I suspect she had no idea, but to a young woman unsure she had picked the right path (me!) she was an inspiration and created a very happy environment for me to find my feet. A particular memory is of a Saturday trip she organised to various Anglo-Saxon churches of North Yorkshire, where we ended with coffee at the home of Dr Dominic Powlesland. It was all slightly surreal but highly enjoyable.

Alongside her administrative and teaching duties, Mary produced major work both on Ælfric and on the post-Conquest life of Old English texts, not least through her collaboration with Elaine Treharne on the project *The Production and Use of English Manuscripts 1060 to 1220*. These contributions helped to shift the field of early English, calling attention to the persistence and vitality of vernacular English writing into the twelfth century; they are represented by the bibliography below. Mary also sat on the editorial board of *Leeds Studies in English* from around 1999 to 2011, including editing a *Festschrift* for Joyce Hill as a special issue in 2006. She was, in Ian Wood's words, an 'astonishingly active' contributor to the *Year's Work in English Studies* over the same period. She was also a lively participant in what was then the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists, and organised highly valued 'Anglo-Saxonists' meals' at the International Medieval Congress every year.

Alongside her academic endeavours, Mary worked to make the world better, putting her energy into the causes she believed in. She joined the women's protest camp at Greenham

Common. At Keele Mary volunteered for Nightline, a peer-support organisation for students, at quite an early stage of its development, and in Leeds as a postgraduate she volunteered for Samaritans, the beginning of a twenty-year commitment. This meant regular shifts listening to distressed and suicidal people on the phone. Then, in the early twenty-first century, Leeds lost its Rape Crisis Centre. Women were still being raped and in need of support, and in 2009, a group of women came together to found a new charity, Support After Rape and Sexual Violence Leeds, to meet the need. Mary was a founder member, bringing to bear her experience of training professionals in a multi-agency approach to deal with domestic violence experienced by women. She led the development of a helpline as part of the new service, recruiting and thoroughly training volunteers, ensuring they would be supported in the work. The SARSVL helpline continues today.

Much of academic life suited Mary well, and she gained promotion to Senior Lecturer. Yet in 2011 she took the bold decision to leave the University and to embark on training for a new career knowing no more than what field she was going to take up: horticulture. In 2013 she completed a Royal Horticultural Society diploma in the Principles and Practices of Horticulture, followed in 2016 by a foundation degree in Garden Design, in the Northern School of Garden Design, then at Craven College, a further education college in Skipton. When she started the RHS diploma, Mary didn't know she would become a successful, award-winning garden designer. But much as she missed her students and her research, she never regretted taking the leap. Her motto for this period came from Stephen Sondheim's song 'Move On': 'the choice may have been mistaken, | the choosing was not'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given her enthusiasm for teaching, Mary ended up lecturing in garden design at the college (from 2016 to 2019), and subsequently several times taught a six-week course in garden design at Bowery Visual Arts, an arts centre in Leeds. Mary's success as a garden designer was not unconnected with her background as an interdisciplinary scholar of the early Middle Ages, which had nurtured a deep understanding of the layers of use and meaning of gardens and landscapes: Rachel Barton, one of Mary's students on the Bowery course, writes 'I have never met a teacher who was so knowledgeable and inspirational. She changed the way I looked at gardening, design, and mostly, landscape'.

At the time of her death, Mary was in the process of building up a successful garden design practice, and was both teaching and publishing in this new sphere. She even managed in her brief career to win a gold medal at the Royal Horticultural Society show at Chatsworth in 2018, and a number of Leeds area gardens to her design remain a testament to her achievements.

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Awards

2018 RHS Chatsworth Flower Show, Gold Medal

John Anderson, Alaric Hall, Joyce Hill and Elaine Treharne