

# OBITUARY

## Constance Fraser

### 1928–2013



Constance Fraser, painted by Tom Manson in 1975.  
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Constance Mary Fraser, who died on 4 June 2013, was a member of this Society for more than 60 years from her election in 1952. She was elected to Council in 1959 and as Secretary in 1971. She served as President from 1990 to 1992 and was thereafter honoured with a Life Membership. When the Society needed to raise funds to buy the Nunnykirk Cross, Constance, quietly and with characteristic generosity of spirit, sold some antiques of her own to make a substantial donation to the fund. For some twenty years, as Indoor Meetings Secretary, she arranged the monthly lectures and she continued to serve on committees of Council almost until her final year. We remember her at meetings reading minutes or making announcements in that very particular, clearly enunciated delivery which she used in formal settings — the product of elocution lessons when she was a child. She expressed some time ago her determination to attend the Society's bicentenary dinner in 2013 and she had decided

which dress she would wear for the occasion. Sad to say, that did not come to pass.

Constance graduated in history from King's College, Newcastle in 1948 and was awarded a doctorate in 1951 for her study of Bishop Bek, which she later developed for her first book. After spells as a Research Assistant in the Department of Palaeography and Diplomatic in Durham, and as a James Knott Fellow in Newcastle, she was appointed in 1957 Staff Tutor in Local History in the then Department of Extra-Mural Studies at Kings College, where George Jobey was already in post, and where she remained until her retirement. In that role she went out and about widely in the region. Her books, *Tyneside*, and *Northumbria* (both written with Kenneth Emsley) arise from this context. People attended her classes year after year and the loyalty was mutual. Well into her retirement years she would say of someone whose name cropped up in conversation that he or she was a student of hers.

The solid underpinning of her scholarship was her work on medieval manuscripts in the archives of the Dean and Chapter in Durham and in the Public Record Office. Her notebooks are full of transcriptions written out in a small, neat hand. Her most enduring scholarly legacy

is as an editor of printed editions and translations of archival material. For the Records Series of this Society and the Surtees Society of Durham she edited manuscripts on matters of government and legal administration and of trade and taxation: *The Records of Anthony Bek, Bishop and Patriarch, 1283–1311*; *Ancient Petitions Relating to Northumberland*; *Northern Petitions of the 14th Century*; *The Northumberland Lay Subsidy Roll of 1296*; *The Newcastle Chamberlain's Accounts 1508–1511*; *The Durham Quarter Sessions Rolls 1471–1625*; *The Northumberland Eyre Roll for 1293*; each a work of disciplined scholarship. In parallel with these, she was for some 30 years General Editor for the Yorkshire Archaeological Society of the project to publish the Rolls of the Manor Court of Wakefield. In this capacity she saw to completion 12 volumes, 6 of these under her own name.

Informed by her archive searches, she published, mostly in journal articles, on topics of historical import. With Kenneth Emsley she wrote on the Palatine Courts of Durham and on other matters legal; and she wrote a series of papers around trading and the merchant communities of Tyneside in the Middle Ages. Her 1959 paper on the *Life and Death of John of Denton* is a compelling account of corruption in local government in the early 14th century: worth reading at any time. She returned to this field as recently as 2009 with a book chapter *The Economic Growth of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1150–1536*. Constance leaves one project unfinished, a study of the Northumberland Hearth Tax of the 1660s, for which she has handed on her notes to her collaborator, Dr Adrian Green.

Apart from a period as a World War II evacuee in Newton Stewart, Constance lived throughout her life in Tynemouth and was, even as an adult, very much under the influence of her parents. Her mother's death affected her deeply and thereafter she lived alone in the house in which she had been brought up, and she developed a strong streak of self-reliance. But while she could show a hard edge, she was appreciative of any kindness shown to her, and she was a gracious guest. Her mother had taught her that it was a guest's duty to be entertaining and so, when invited to dinner, she would come prepared with anecdotes and snippets of conversation. She built a life for herself around involvement in organisations such as this Society and the Association of Northumberland Local History Societies. But this was more than just a way of finding company. Here again, her mother's influence was strong and enduring in instilling an ethos of community service which Constance brought particularly to her involvement in the life of Holy Saviour's parish in Tynemouth and to her many years' service with the WRVS. She was still delivering books on wheels to housebound old people when she herself had turned eighty.

For me, a single item to epitomise Constance's scholarship is her short paper of 1955 in *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 'Gilly-corn and the Customary of the Convent of Durham'. She showed that the gilly-corn payment recorded in a 1424 schedule in the cartulary of the Durham Almoner must have originated more than 300 years earlier, before the division of the Durham lands between the Bishopric and the Priory; and by comparing this schedule of 1424 with the Priory feodary of 1430, she realised that gilly-corn payments on free land were associated with the archaic tenure of drengage. This study is a small gem, with detailed and disciplined reading and analysis sustained through several steps of argument and brought to completion with flashes of insight. Here in miniature, shown at an early stage of her career, are the qualities which Constance brought to a lifetime of scholarship.

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