

## PROFESSOR BARRY COWARD (1941 - 2011)

---

*By Professor Julian Swann*

Professor Barry Coward, who has died after a long and courageous battle against cancer, was one of that rare breed of historians who become totally synonymous with their subject. For generations of teachers and students, his brilliant synthesis *The Stuart Age: a history of England, 1603-1714*, first published in 1980, has been the essential guide to one of the most complex periods of British history, and as Barry spent his final days putting the finishing touches to a new revised edition, that tradition is set to continue.

Barry Coward's scholarly reputation was established with *The Stanleys, Lords Stanleys and Earls of Derby 1385-1672: the Origins, Wealth and Power of a land-owning family* published in 1983, which remains a model of meticulous social history. Barry remained interested in the study of land-owning classes throughout his career, although he was also to the fore in rethinking the history of the civil wars and Protectorate. A steady stream of publications resulted including *Social Change and Continuity in Early Modern England, 1550-1750* (1988), a well-respected biography of *Cromwell* (1991) that has been translated into, amongst other languages, Russian, Czech and Portuguese, a groundbreaking study of the *Cromwellian Protectorate* (2002), the *Companion to the History of Stuart Britain* (2003), and most recently with Peter Gaunt *English Historical Documents, 1603-1660* (2010). However, it was *The Stuart Age* that really encapsulated Barry because it exemplified his belief in the need for historians to convey their passion for the subject to students and the wider public.

Barry was born in Rochdale in 1941 and was educated at the local grammar school. A stalwart supporter of the local football team and a proud Lancastrian, Barry was sufficiently open-minded to cross the Pennines in order to study history at Sheffield. Having completed his doctorate under the supervision of Robin Jeffs, he was appointed to a lectureship in the History department at Birkbeck College in 1966, which was then ruled with a rod of iron by Professor R.R. Darlington. He was quick to warn the new lecturer that marriage and scholarship were incompatible. This was unfortunate as Barry had met his future wife, Shirley, at Sheffield, and they were married in 1967, although not before Shirley had been forced to hide in the ladies when Darlington was spotted prowling the corridors. Thankfully these inauspicious beginnings did not put Barry off Birkbeck, and the College's mission to bring University education to all fitted perfectly

### PROFESSOR BARRY COWARD (1941 - 2011)

---

with his own philosophy, and he remained there until his retirement over forty years later.

Barry's commitment to his students at Birkbeck was legendary, and he possessed the rare ability of a born teacher to explain complex arguments with wit and clarity. Although always to the fore in encouraging curriculum development, Barry had no time for unnecessary bureaucracy and as the climate in Higher Education shifted towards a culture of research at all costs his was a voice of conscience constantly reminding his colleagues that students should come first. It was typical of Barry that when the Birkbeck Student History Society ran into difficulties, he not only convened the meetings to resolve the problem, but also acted as a *de facto* secretary until it was back on a sound footing. Although always happiest teaching, Barry also served terms as Head of Department and Dean of Arts, emerging from both of these ordeals with more friends than when he had started. As the Department of History, Classics and Archaeology (as it now was) rapidly expanded, he became the mentor of countless colleagues, cheerfully passing on helpful advice, often over a pint or two in the college bar. After his retirement, he was elected a Fellow of Birkbeck in 2008, and retained his close links with the Department as Emeritus Professor.

Throughout his career, Barry was active in raising the wider public profile of the discipline. A keen supporter of his local Central London branch of the Historical Association of which he was President from 1995, he would never turn down an opportunity to speak, no matter how distant the venue. Having served as a council member of the Historical Association since 1998, he was appointed Vice President in 2002 and served as President from 2005-8, helping it to overcome financial crisis and to celebrate its centenary year in 2006. Barry was also President of the Cromwell Association from 1999 to 2009, and was a critical admirer of the Lord Protector, who he saw as a fascinating mixture of religious zeal and political ambition, whose rule had begun with the promise of far-reaching reform and ended in failure. Barry himself had more in common with the radical than the puritan tradition, and he was a firm supporter of the traditional values of the Labour party. One of the few times that he looked genuinely worried was on discovering that some of his devoted students were planning on nominating him for a CBE.

### PROFESSOR BARRY COWARD (1941 - 2011)

---

His enthusiasm to promote history in schools was demonstrated by more than thirty years of service as an 'A' level examiner. In the 1970s, he played a large part in devising and then thereafter running the History Individual Study Examination pioneered by the Cambridge University Local Examinations Syndicate, a novel system of examining at this level that was taken up by other examining boards. Barry acted as Principal Examiner of the OCR Individual Study Examination from the mid 1990s until it was replaced as part of the 2001 A-Level reforms. Such was his popularity that a group of teachers honoured him with the creation of a 'Barry Coward fan club', although he was far too modest to mention it.

He is survived by Shirley, their sons Anthony and Nick, daughter Lynne, and their six grandchildren.

Professor Julian Swann is Professor of History at Birkbeck, University of London.