

**The Royal Society of Edinburgh
and Edinburgh International Festival**

**A Conversation about *The James Plays*
*The Three Kings – James I, James II and James III***

**Rona Munro, dramatist and
Dr Michael Brown, Reader in Medieval History, University of St Andrews**

Wednesday 4 June 2014

Report by Matthew Shelley

An evening of two short talks and audience questions focusing on The James Plays, three works by Rona Munro which are the centrepiece of the Edinburgh International Festival's 2014 theatre programme. Roy Luxford, the Festival's Director of Planning, who introduced the evening, said they draw on themes of nation and nationhood to offer a complex and compelling narrative on Scottish culture.

The event was chaired by Jan McDonald FRSE, Emeritus Professor of Drama at Glasgow University. She said the plays are a new cycle, centred on the lives of James I, James II and James III of Scotland, which has its world premiere at the Festival before moving to London. Michael Brown was welcomed as a leading expert on the period covered by the plays. He has called 15th-Century Scotland “a period of great personalities and striking events, often violent, which capture the imagination”.

Professor McDonald described Rona Munro as one of the female dramatists responsible for a flowering of Scottish theatre in the late 20th Century. Her work has been credited with helping re-establish a sense of Scottish cultural identity. Her plays have been performed by the National Theatre of Scotland, the Royal Shakespeare Company and many others. Her hope for *The James Plays* is to share her own “fevered enthusiasm” for medieval Scottish history with a wider audience.

Michael Brown

“Fifteenth-Century Scotland has always been in the shadow of other historical events”, said Dr Brown. Popular awareness often shifts seamlessly from Wallace, Bruce and the Wars of Independence to Mary Queen of Scots, John Knox and the Reformation, as if there were nothing important in between.

Dr Brown argued that the 15th Century was a defining period for Scottish nationhood, the time of greatest separation from the rest of the British Isles. Indeed, he said it has much to offer us today in a secular Scotland that is exploring self-government. James I, II and III each took distinctive and controversial approaches to ruling their realm. Then, as now, Scottish and English practice in areas such as law, taxation and education were diverging.

The three kings centralised power, creating institutions focused on Edinburgh. They increased their own power at the expense of the great noble families and also asserted their authority over traditionally autonomous areas. James I regarded the Highlands as a

place to be tamed. Looking to the future, Dr Brown said that we are again heading for a time when the balance between centre and periphery may come into question.

Expressing mixed feelings about James I, Dr Brown called him “a man who demonstrates what medieval personal monarchy could achieve”. After 18 years of captivity in England, he returned and brought down the Albanys, who had ruled in his absence. James then set out to establish an ideology of royalty based on the notion of royal justice.

The chronicler Walter Bower portrays James I as a “force of nature”, a lawgiver who restores peace but is greedy. Ultimately his enemies saw him as a tyrant and he was murdered in Perth in 1437.

James II was “a psychoanalyst’s dream – a prime example of what happens if you have a tortured childhood”. Known as “James of the Fiery Face” due to a birthmark, his father was assassinated when he was seven and his mother imprisoned.

The defining moment of his reign came when he stabbed to death William, Earl of Douglas, who was at Stirling Castle under safe conduct. According to Dr Brown, this led to the downfall of the Black Douglases, the greatest noble house in Scotland. The destruction finished his father’s work to create a strong monarchy secure from Lowland rivals.

James III was enigmatic and began his reign with good intentions, said Dr Brown. Yet he was divisive even within his own family – probably killing one brother, exiling the other and alienating his sisters. A coup resulted in James III’s temporary imprisonment in Edinburgh Castle. Six years later, his son led a rebellion and the king was slain in the aftermath of battle.

Dr Brown concluded that the personalities and events of 15th-Century Scotland are among the brightest and the bloodiest – the red and gold of the Lion Rampant. Bringing these stories to life is an excellent way to inform and entertain the public.

Rona Munro

The epic quality of life in the medieval period is something that Rona Munro finds moving and helped inspire *The James Plays*. Society was confronted on a daily basis with stark realities of death and disease in a way “that brings people down to what is basic about being human in the best and the worst sense”. At the same time, she was also fascinated by people’s struggle to find better structures and forms of society.

There were several reasons why she concentrated on kings rather than commoners, including that “the stories are great”. She added that if you give people a love of the stories, then they will go and seek out more about the rest of the period.

The RSC’s history cycle brought home to Ms Munro the way in which strong stories make the past accessible, and also pointed out how much she knew about English history due to the influence of Shakespeare. *The James Plays*, she said, are an attempt to begin a process of popularising Scottish medieval history in a parallel way.

The starting point for writing the plays, however, was that they could not be history lessons – they had to be about human struggle. Ms Munro researched the personalities

of each king, their queens and those closest to them and identified key stories. She was interested in James I as the writer of the poem *The Kingis Quair*. Her play looks at what happens when a man of ideas, with the soul of a poet, is confronted by the realities of medieval kingship.

With James II, Ms Munro was dealing with a boy who comes to the throne on the back of violence. The child then witnesses the murder of his cousins and is told it is in his name. As a young man, he becomes a killer himself “in the passion of the moment”.

The jumping-off point for James III, said Ms Munro, was a king having to struggle with major political challenges and personal unpopularity. Her play looks at “why at a certain point it is as if he almost stops caring about how to be diplomatic”. She presents a character who is more interested in pet projects and favourites than good government. Describing him as a “Marmite” monarch, she said he inspired both loathing and intense loyalty.

Summing up, she emphasised that the plays are works of dramatic fiction rather than academic precision. “My ambition for them is that they will give a sense of the history, a sense of the people, and inspire an enthusiasm for the stories about a fascinating and neglected period”.

Questions:

Q: Was Scotland more turbulent in the 15th Century than England?

A: Michael Brown said Shakespeare’s Henry VI and Richard III show that things “were not going exactly swimmingly” there either. However, James I and II were asserting a form of kingship that created resentment amongst their leading nobles and faced different issues from English monarchs caught up in dynastic struggles.

Q: Is it possible to delve into personalities of the past using insights of modern psychoanalysis?

A: Rona Munro said there is a common misconception that people in the past were simpler than us, but the truth is that they thought and felt as we do. Whilst they were products of their own culture, it is perfectly possible to look at how a seven-year-old boy might have been affected by traumatic events and suggest how they shaped his life.

Q: Why were these three kings chosen and are there plans to write about more?

A: Initially, said Rona Munro, there was an idea that “there are all the Richards and all the Henrys, let’s do the Jameses”. But this soon grew into a fascination for the period. The existence of Bower’s chronicles, which give such vivid insight into the era, was also a factor. She added that she would love to extend the series.

Q: Women are often hidden from history, but have large roles in these plays – how was that achieved?

A: There was less detail available about the women, which gave more space for dramatic interpretation. However, Rona Munro said there is substantial information about their lifestyles. For example, Queen Joan appeared highly capable. Even as a very young woman, she was able to manage a royal household and exercise all the diplomacy and tact required to handle court life and this earned her great respect.

Michael Brown added that traditional history has downplayed an exceptional cast of women from that period. These were women with prestige and authority which, whilst different from that of men, could be very considerable. The example was given of Isabella, Countess of Lennox, who was imprisoned for many years and her close male relatives executed. Yet, on her release, she rapidly re-established her family's authority, despite royal antipathy.

Q: Were the kings influenced by events and people beyond Scotland?

A: According to Michael Brown, they were heavily influenced by the outside world. James I spent years at the English Court after being taken captive aged 12 en-route to France, and his perception of kingship was based on Henry V of England. All three kings craved respect and recognition on a European stage.

Q: How were the plays written, as there is so much material?

A: Rona Munro said all three were commissioned at once, so she initially conceived of them as a family saga. She then identified the human stories she wanted to tell. One of the actors, Gordon Kennedy, has summed it up as "telling a story in history not about history".

A Vote of Thanks was proposed by Roy Luxford.

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