

William Urry, a talk given by Marjorie Lyle to the Canterbury Recorder Talking Newspaper.

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William Urry at work

My name is Marjorie Lyle. I have memories that go back perhaps beyond what some of you remember. In 1955, we arrived in Canterbury because my husband, Lawrence, had become head of history at the Simon Langton Boys' Grammar School that was on the old bomb site in the Whitefriars. He'd been promised a commodious history room. It turned out to be a freezing prefab and in the winter the boys would put up their hands, "Please Sir, my nib's broken and the ink's frozen in the ink well."

We have been very lucky in the subsequent years in meeting most of the key figures who in the immediate post-war period laid the foundation for the Canterbury we know today. I want to talk to you about the most extraordinary and remarkable of them all.

I was pushing my pram load of children up the High Street one day in March 1956 when I was stopped dead in my tracks by a bent figure with a huge lump of stone coming out of the Fleur de Lys, an old coaching inn just beyond the County Hotel where Bon Marche is now and this figure said, "Wait here." He staggered across the High Street, stumbled up the steps of the Beaney and disappeared inside. Intrigued, I waited. After a few minutes he came out dusting his hands. "At least I've saved that from the vandals." The improving zealots of the city council were in the middle of pulling down the old Fleur de Lys coaching inn, having just pulled down the Guildhall because, at that point, anything old was a red rag to their bull. "I'm William Urry," he said and off we went up the high street and he enquired, "Are you new here? Just look at that window up there. That's where Dot Gradell, she was Christopher Marlowe's sister you know, she upturned a full chamber pot on one of her husband's awkward customers." He suddenly veered into the pram. "Look out!" I said. "I'm just avoiding the bollard that used to stand here in the fourteenth century" he said.

On we went till we got to the corner of Mercery Lane. "And that is where Christopher Marlowe, on his last visit to Canterbury in 1593, just before he was murdered, assaulted poor old Will Corkin the lute player. If you could look as I do into the city archives you'd find a rose petal put in the margin at the point where they made up their quarrel." By this time we'd reached The Parade by Amos and Dawton's estate agent's. "I don't suppose you know who owned that shop," he said. "That was Robert Cushman. He was the Puritan shut up in the Westgate for fly posting when he ought to have been in church. He was the one that hired the Mayflower and quite a lot of other Canterbury people, especially the immigrants, went with him, including the ancestors of Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt."

So we went on up the high street. Every house had a story until at last we got to Woolworths."This was the old Roman bath house you know. I've got to leave you but I'll just tell you a story against myself. I went up to the electrical counter where there was a gormless girl standing. I said to her, 'Do you realise you are standing on the site of an illegal twelfth century mint?' She just looked at me quite unfazed and said, 'Mints is the next counter sir.'"

So what was the background of this extraordinary man who has been my own inspiration for the last forty years as I have tried to stumble in his footsteps writing about the city? Before the First World War his father, George, who came from an old Somerset millwright's family, came to Canterbury to work for Holman's in Dover Street. Here he met and married his wife. The pair of them both had excellent

memories which they bequeathed to their eldest son, and were keenly interested in history. William himself was born in 1913 and was quickly followed by two siblings within the next two years so naturally there was not much money about and he began his education at Payne Smith School but very soon won a scholarship to Kent College. There, in the fullness of time, he took his School Certificate and luckily got exemption from matriculation to London University.

His first job was working in the library of London University by day but, because of his exemption, he was able to go to Birkbeck College every night to study for two degrees which he had achieved by 1937. It was a very hectic regime he had set himself but during his teens in Canterbury he'd been an incessant walker. He started the first of fifteen notebooks at the age of fourteen in which he recorded anything of interest and everything that he found on his walks. When he was eighteen he wrote in his diary, '*One day I am determined to write a history of Canterbury.*'

He'd been befriended by two of the Cathedral canons, Canon Woodruffe who had himself written about the Cathedral, and Canon Jenkins at the Cathedral archives and library which he haunted in his spare time. He was very proud during the war from 1940 to 1945 to serve in the county regiment, The Buffs, but at the end of the war it was back to the old London grind working in the library by day, studying for his doctorate by night at Birkbeck and all the time pining for Canterbury and very lonely. He wrote at the time, 'I walk lonely through a wilderness of yellow brick'. With all this going on in his mind, it's not surprising that he turned down chances to work in Oxford and at the Public Record Office and came back to Canterbury in a very lowly capacity [and very poorly paid] as the Assistant to the Cathedral archivist whom he very soon succeeded and in 1951 added the job of city archivist. He had just one elderly assistant and he set about restoring and rebinding the archives that had got damaged in the War and re-cataloguing the entire library collection. He also penetrated the dank basement of the Beaney and there he discovered the city records which had languished there since the floods of the 1920s, damp and decaying. They'd been further soused during the fire precautions during the blitz but they too had to be rescued so with a wife, Kate, two small children, very little money and two demanding jobs it was small wonder that he had very little time for his own ten point plan of publication that he'd set himself back in his teens.

In 1967 he did manage to publish his doctoral thesis, *Canterbury under the Angevin Kings* with an accompanying folio of maps he'd drawn himself of the city at the time of William the Conqueror. This was a ground breaking work which proved in time to be an exemplar for further studies in towns like Winchester and York and was quite an amazing publication. I used to see him at weekends down on his hands and knees in front of Norman buildings recorded in Domesday Book in 1084 with his patient children holding the tape measure, re-measuring every single property. When I opened the archaeological trust charity shop in Northgate in 1983, I remembered

that he'd told me that the Jolly Sailor pub opposite has exactly the same footprint as its Norman predecessor.

His very great generosity with his own time made him his own worst enemy. A constant stream of renowned scholars from the Americas, from Europe, from Britain beat a path to the archives where they always found him, ready to give of his time. The subsequent books they wrote on archbishops or Becket or Marlowe or architecture all acknowledged that without the invaluable help of Dr. Urry they would never have seen the light of day.

I remember him once giving up a Saturday afternoon to a small group of us and producing *The Accord of Winchester* of 1081. Translating freely from the Latin as he went, he pointed out that William the Conqueror and his queen couldn't read or write and here were the crosses against their names while the high ups in the Church had all written that of course they agreed that Canterbury had precedence over York. He then ran his finger to the bottom of the parchment and pointed out that the Archbishop of York had written, very blackly, *Concedo*, I yield, among the other agreements. It was not just the scholars, it was citizens and societies who enjoyed his two hour lectures, his three hour walks because always he overran, due to a superfluity of asides. "Oh, I just must tell you this before I go on," he would say and another ten minutes would ensue.

He also was given full pages of the *Kentish Gazette*, four columns in those days, for long articles whenever the anniversaries of Canterbury pilgrims, Canterbury immigrants, Canterbury martyrs or great Canterbury figures came around. He also produced a flow of occasional pamphlets about the city's markets, its street names, its parish churches, and its city militia. When I was teaching at Barton Court my colleagues and I, with the pupils, were trying to produce a book called *Thirteen Centuries of Barton Court* for our retiring headmistress. He got to hear of this and said, "Oh you've got to put in the bell mound. Think of all those secretaries and typists and medical assistants who work in Canterbury and haven't a clue about the history of the city. I'll do a tape about the bell mound." "What bell mound?" I said. "Oh the bell mound of St Augustine's Abbey for its bell tower. It's just opposite your dairy gate," so off he set and did this tape, The shorthand girls took the tape down in shorthand, the typists typed it out and it appeared in the eventual book because he was really keen that people would know about the city he loved so much.

At last, in 1968, the offer of a one term fellowship at All Souls College, the prestigious research college of Oxford, lured him away from Canterbury. He told in his inimitable way the story of his first, very nervous appearance at High Table in All Souls. An elderly and bent scholar sat beside him, pushed him the salt cellar and said, "Salt, Urry?"

"No thank you."

"Mice are very salt, you know."

"You've eaten a mouse then?"

"Oh no, not me but we had a nursemaid, was with one of those French families when the Germans were besieging Paris in 1871. She always said that mice were very salt." He would tell this in his own wonderful way.

He had already been diagnosed as having a short time to live as this was the first of five lethal cancers with which he contended until his untimely death in 1981, gallantly and without complaint. I remember when we took him out to dinner after he'd lectured to the Archaeological Society and asked if he was alright to eat a certain type of dish we had ordered. "Oh, my whole insides are made of tin these days so I can eat anything," he said.

He used his time at All Souls to do his own work on Beckett at the Bodleian Library and he so relished the time for his own work that he accepted the job of Reader in Medieval Latin Palaeography at the University of Oxford with a Fellowship at All Souls at St Edmund Hall. This in fact was Canterbury's loss but his students' gain. They loved him as he moved effortlessly from Latin into English or French or quoted from Anglo Saxon and then translated from his capacious memory. In 1971 he did manage to publish his edition of William Somner's *Antiquities of Canterbury (1640)*, the very first history of Canterbury with a long preface by Urry because he felt a very strong affinity with this seventeenth century predecessor and namesake, who was so like him in many ways. He too had been befriended by cathedral canons. He too was an incessant walker round the city. He too kept copious notebooks and in fact in one of them wrote "Anyone who tries to write local history without walking the streets is a fool," a sentiment with which William Urry would be in total accord. In his long preface he lamented the fact that nowadays no single person could possibly encompass all of Canterbury's intimate connections with national history, church history, with architectural history, with the arts or with the towering figures from St Augustine onwards who had been associated with the city. He was working on his long-planned history of the city at the time of his death, lamenting how much time he had wasted on Becket and Marlowe. Edited versions of his *Life and Times of Christopher Marlowe* and of *The Last Days of Becket* have been published since his death but really they are only the tip of the iceberg of a pile of knowledge that is still awaiting further exploration.

Perhaps his greatest legacy has been on the generously shared scholarship which he shared with subsequent historians of Canterbury, people like Dr Margaret Sparkes who edited the cathedral history; people like Tim Tatton Brown and Paul Bennett and their researchers at the Canterbury Archaeological Trust, Professor Jackie Eales of Christ Church and her husband, Richard, of the University of Kent, who have produced many works since to fill in some of Urry's gaps. In fact, every

year sees the publication of some new work on local history or new walks, new talks, new courses, all of which would have delighted his unquiet spirit .

I would like to end with a quote from his diary when he was exiled in London. “I wish my job were in Canterbury. They all have so much fun, more fun than I do. There is sport for the athlete, beauty for the artist, company for the lonely, solitude for the weary, in trouble, sympathy, in joy, praise and congratulations, but above all things, charity.”