Daughters of the North: writing the biography of Jean Gordon and Mary, Queen of Scots

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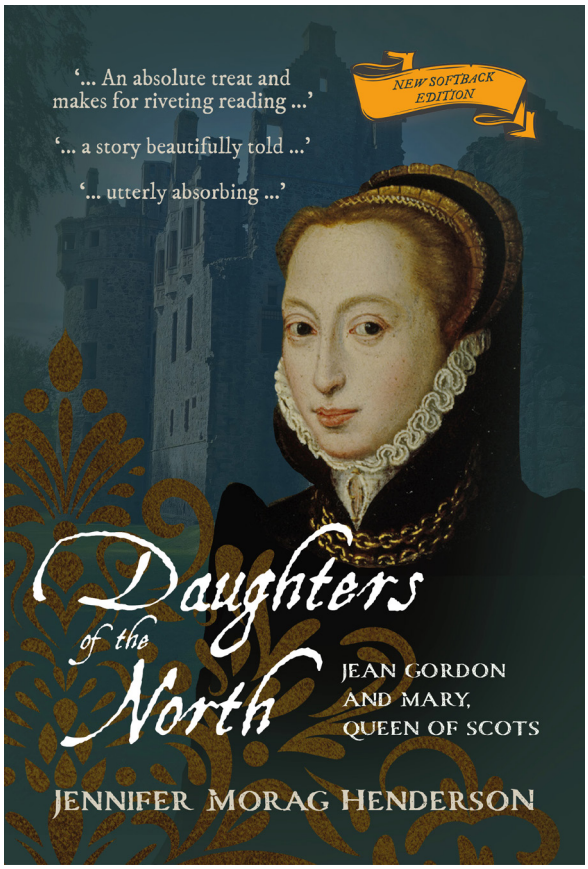
Jean Gordon (1545-1629) is best remembered as the first wife of the Earl of Bothwell. Jean was Bothwell's alibi for the night of Darnley's murder, demonstrating her key position at the court of Mary, Queen of Scots, and involvement in many of the well-known events of Mary's reign. Bothwell then divorced Jean in order to marry Mary, Queen of Scots – the marriage that led to Mary's downfall. However, Jean did much more than play a supporting role in the drama of Mary, Queen of Scots: as the daughter of a man once known as 'the King of the North' she had played an important role since her childhood in the politics and alliances of the north-east of Scotland, while through her second marriage to the Earl of Sutherland she became the most powerful woman in the Far North. Moreover, Jean Gordon had huge personal agency: she was a woman in charge, overseeing industrial development and clan alliances at a time when the Highlands were largely overlooked – and historians have continued to overlook her contribution. And, intriguingly, Jean married three times, with the third marriage being to a man she had been in love with since she was a teenager, a man she had been forbidden to marry in order to form the union with Bothwell.

My biography *Daughters of the North: Jean Gordon and Mary, Queen of Scots* has just been published in a new softback edition, by Whittles Publishing. On first publication, the book received excellent reviews and was longlisted for the Highland Book Prize. I'm delighted that it has been released in this new format. During recent publicity events for the new edition, listening to the intelligent audience questions, I have been reflecting on what it means to write a historical biography. In particular, I took part in an event with Prof David Worthington, head of the History department at the University of the Highlands and Islands, chaired by S.G. MacLean, author of the bestselling novel *The Bookseller of Inverness*. We explored our shared interest in history, and discussed the different ways we have chosen to present our research: either through academic study and writing, fictionalisation, or popular biography. These approaches to explaining and sharing Scottish culture have interesting similarities and differences.

I had a long-standing interest in history, but also a wider interest in writing and stories, and I found that, for me, history came alive through studying people's lives. After I began to write and publish biographical studies, I became aware of



the academic study of life-writing, and the study of the different approaches that people can take.

My approach is sociological, as opposed to psychological. I am interested in the worlds people live in. Everyone's life is a tension between their free choices, and the options that are available to them. Jean Gordon was a strong, sometimes single-minded woman, but her choices come alive through studying the world that she lived in: what did life look like for women in the 16th century? What was her upbringing like? Was it typical – how did it compare with others? How did Scotland compare with England, or with France, or with Scandinavian countries? What other countries would Scotland have looked to in the 16th century? What was the culture that Jean was exposed to – education, books, plays, art?

In the introduction to my book, I explain that I wanted to know more about my home in the north of Scotland. People ascribe meaning to 'the north'. Images of clans and Jacobites swirl through our popular culture, while, as a playwright, I found that describing a character as 'a Highland woman' tended to lead to the character being played in a particular way – as a meek, quiet, Walter Scott-type female figure, shrouded in a shawl and diffident in her opinions. I wanted to know what life was really like for women in the north of Scotland in the 16th century. Jean's life, from her birth in the north-east to her second marriage in the Far North, covered a geographical area that was very familiar to me, and offered a new, northern perspective on the familiar story of Mary, Queen of Scots.

The romantic story of Mary, Queen of Scots appeals to many people, and I was interested in what is sometimes portrayed as the love triangle between Mary, Bothwell and Jean Gordon. There are many, sometimes wildly different, versions of this relationship in historical and fictional representations of Mary's story, and I wanted to know what the truth was. My attention was caught by a footnote in Antonia Fraser's classic biography of Mary, Queen of Scots: it explained that Jean had not, in fact, wanted to marry Bothwell at all, because she had been in love with someone else, and shared that Jean actually did go on to marry her childhood sweetheart, at the end of a long and full life. Almost everyone at the court of Mary, Queen of Scots met with

disaster – not least Bothwell, who, whatever he did in life, did not deserve his horrible fate in a Scandinavian prison. I was curious to know how Jean had escaped this sad destiny.

I quickly learnt that Jean's life was far more complex than her brief mentions in Mary's story could show. She actually married three times, and through her second marriage became Countess of Sutherland, in charge of a huge swathe of the north of Scotland. 'Countess of Sutherland' is a loaded title in Highland history, that comes with many negative associations, and I wanted to know how this woman – whose life story I was already invested in – fitted in to the history of a family whose later actions in the Highlands Clearances were notorious. I was to learn that Jean essentially shaped what the Sutherlands were to become.

Being a biographer, rather than a historian, brought other advantages. Jean Gordon lived until she was in her 80s, from the reign of Regent Mary of Guise through to the reign of Charles I. The historians who study Mary of Guise are not necessarily the same historians who study Charles I. Likewise, study of the Reformation isn't always linked to study of clan feuds, or emigration to north America – but all these things were encompassed by this one woman's life. By following Jean Gordon, I could see someone's reaction to multiple events, and see how changes in Scottish history were experienced in one lifetime. Studying history through the reigns of kings and queens is a discredited approach, but even studying history through particular civil movements involves chopping things up into arbitrary blocks: people's lives are rarely so neat, and biography can show us how history is lived.

Jean Gordon was not just reacting to events either, but had a lot of power. It was important to me not just to examine secondary sources, but to go back, as much as possible, to original sources. I was able to write a full and rich biography of Jean's life because there survive many different papers of relevance to her life, from financial and administrative documents to a cache of letters written by Jean herself. To find several private letters is fairly unusual for someone from the 16th century, and particularly unusual for a woman from the 16th century. Jean, though, was effectively in charge of the Sutherland estates for three generations: during the lifetime of her husband (sometimes, though possibly unfairly, described as a weak man), again during the minority of her son, and then during the minority of her grandson. Any analysis of the Sutherland estates that ignores her contribution is flawed. On original estate documents, she is the signatory to important decisions, often a lone female name among 'sundry other country gentlemen'. When she died, Jean was buried with the full honours usually reserved for a male earl.

Jean's son Robert Gordon wrote *The Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland* in Jean's lifetime – a document that, for me as a biographer, became not just a history of a family, but a source for a son's descriptions of his mother. We gain from Robert's writing personal details that it would be impossible to find elsewhere: descriptions of how he was sent to a wet-nurse as a child; descriptions of Jean's lost children who died in infancy.

Robert Gordon's *Genealogy* is a fascinating document in many ways, which would repay wider study. I found, when reading about Jean Gordon, that in many cases historians had focused on events and sources from further south in Scotland, around the troubled court of Mary, Queen of Scots. Events at court were dramatic – but there was also plenty going on in the north of Scotland. 'The Helmsdale Poisoning' is an example of the Earls of Caithness and Sutherland reacting to and taking advantage of the chaos around Mary's court to settle personal scores in the north, while the dispensers of justice were too preoccupied to take full reprisals. Historians have continued to be distracted by Mary's court, perhaps overlooking that this, along with subsequent clashes between Caithness and Sutherland, was a key moment in the battle for power in the Far North, linked to the slow decline of the clan system. Much of Jean's time as Countess of Sutherland was taken up by the interplay between Caithness, Sutherland and the Clan Mackay – and it was by no means settled who would emerge victorious. The clan system in Scotland is popularly shown as ending abruptly after Culloden, but by studying Jean's life I saw how it was changing gradually throughout the 16th century, one slow battle and alliance at a time. For Jean, too, this was not a theoretical change, but a personal one: she arranged the marriage of her daughter to the Chief of Mackay, and the clans' loss of power became a personal relationship between Jean and her first grandson, Donald of the Troubles, Chief of Mackay and later leader of the famous Mackay army in the Thirty Years War. I could read about the development of the Mackay clan's status through Jean, Donald and Jean's sons' letters. By focusing on a personal relationship, I could also make a complex situation clear and understandable for the reader.

Jean Gordon lived pre-Clearances, when the population of Scotland was not disproportionately centred around the capital. Later events, rather than an accurate assessment of relative contemporary importance, turned the focus away from the north. Another example of the way that history is framed by contemporary assumptions is the attitude to women. Instead of examining what women were doing, assumptions are made by historians of what women should be doing. A concrete example of this is Jean Gordon's written marriage arrangement with Bothwell.

Jean Gordon and Bothwell's marriage and divorce, so crucial to Mary, Queen of Scots' story, have been widely studied. One point that several historians have noted is the signatures on Jean and Bothwell's marriage agreement: Jean Gordon's mother, Lady Huntly (Elizabeth Keith) signs 'with her hand led on the pen'. This, stated more than one historian, was because she was a woman, and so couldn't write. However, Elizabeth Keith was not only literate, she was an able administrator who had run the family estate while her husband Lord Huntly was imprisoned in England, arranging marriages for her children and writing to the Regent Mary of Guise. Copies of holograph letters, written in Elizabeth Keith's own hand, have been transcribed many years ago and are easily available in the printed correspondence of Mary of Guise.

So why was Elizabeth Keith's hand 'led on the

pen'? She wasn't infirm, as she continued to be a force both within the Huntly family and in the wider arena of the Scottish court for many years – going on to play a prominent role, for example, in Mary's escape after the Rizzio murder, and advising the new Earl of Huntly, her son George, right up until Carberry Hill. I believe it was a statement of her objection to the marriage of Jean and Bothwell. A plausible reason for this is that Elizabeth Keith was a staunch Catholic, and Bothwell was a committed Protestant. There may also have been personal objections to Bothwell, or the knowledge of Jean's prior commitment to another man.

Even more interestingly, for a biographer, below Elizabeth Keith's signature is Jean Gordon's, and she signs 'with my own hand'. If historians drew attention to this it was to say that it showed that Jean was literate, while her mother was not. But in the new context – that they were both literate – it shows a moment of tension at the wedding: Jean's mother was opposed to the match, but Jean is clearly stating that she makes her own choice. In a novel, this could be a dramatic scene. In my biography, I wanted introduce the idea of speculation over motive, and question and show how the signatures had been ignored and misinterpreted, but my aim in this book was to look for the truth and increase understanding, not introduce fiction.

As a writer, I also widened my search for information, looking not only at documents, but also at more non-traditional sources, such as art, music and literature, to help me understand my subject. There are two portraits of Jean: one made at the time of her marriage to Bothwell, and one of her as an old woman. This is an incredible resource for a biographer of a 16th century figure – so many people within my narrative had no portrait made of them, so I could only imagine what they looked like, and even very important figures only had one portrait. What people look like matters: later in her life, Jean Gordon had a fraught relationship with her neighbour, the Earl of Caithness – who was, in fact, Bothwell's nephew. With no portrait of him, it is impossible to say whether or not the nephew resembled Bothwell – but, surely, for Jean, it would have affected her personal interaction with the Earl in some way if he looked very similar to her ex-husband. For Jean, though, I had two portraits, which I could compare and see the passing of time, and imagine how Jean had reacted to the incredible events of her life. Because Jean was a wealthy woman, these are very high-quality portraits, by the best painters of the day, at a time when portraiture was what British art was renowned for. These paintings helped to bring her alive.

Songs, too, were a way to understand Jean Gordon's life. The ballad tradition of the north-east has preserved many songs that have their roots in the time of Jean's life. Her family were prominent, important people, whose choices affected the lives of people around them, and their exploits were not forgotten. Songs have to be used carefully as evidence – Jean's life did not play out exactly as it's told in the song about her early love, Alex Ogilvie, "The Duke o' Gordon's Daughters" – but the song itself is evidence of how much her life was gossiped over, and how important

her marriage choices would be to the wider community. Jean's sister Margaret's marriage to the Master of Forbes should have brought a feud to an end – it didn't, and the wider community was very aware of the consequences of that. Jean's marriages had an impact on people around her and the songs reflect that. Meanwhile, the antics of Jean's brother Adam, the 'Herod of the North', are remembered in some much darker songs of feuding, and show how her family's reputation was viewed in different sections of society.

Literature, too, was a way into understanding Jean's thought process: her first two marriages were organised, dynastic unions. The story of her lost love, Alex Ogilvie, was romantic – but how would Jean have seen it herself? The legal wording of their marriage agreement is dry, but suggests their union is not one of necessity. Jean's son Robert talked about how Jean married 'for the sake of her family', but there did not seem to be any benefit to anyone other than the couple themselves. The gossip reported at Mary, Queen of Scots' court, and the songs of the north-east, supported the idea that Jean's third marriage was a genuine love story. Organising my timeline of events, I realised that Jean's son Robert had attended court at the time of the premiere of several Shakespeare plays. "Romeo and Juliet" was a contemporary play for Jean Gordon: the 16th century idea of love was not that different to our own.

After I wrote my first biography, the life of the Golden Age crime writer Josephine Tey, I realised that many people did not quite know how biography worked. There sometimes seemed to be an assumption that a biographer had all the facts and just needed to lay them out. There was no full understanding of how the facts had to be discovered, usually in a random order, and then tested. In order to make a readable, accessible biography, the facts also have to be written in an engaging way – and the reader needs to clearly understand why they are important to both the protagonist, and to the later reader. This is not necessarily the same job that a historian is doing.

As a writer, I focus on the telling of the story: in this book, for Jean Gordon, that meant the presentation of the facts. I want to know the facts of what happened, but the writing matters – I don't want to have read something that is painfully dry. However, although I am not a historian, I was not writing a novel and making things up either: every piece of information in my book was as rigorously checked as I could manage, and the book is fully referenced so that readers can check for themselves – as I enjoy doing when I read history.

I believe our history is important: the story of Jean Gordon's life tells me so much about the past in the north of Scotland, and about women's lives; how things have developed and changed until they have reached our current day. I also believe biography is important: learning about Jean Gordon helped me to put the bigger story of Mary, Queen of Scots into context; it showed me how historians had made choices about what to emphasise; and it gave me an insight into how one person had lived through many different eras, and what bigger changes meant for the actions of individuals. This sort of understanding gives empathy, which we can apply to our lives

now. And finally, I love writing and stories: Jean Gordon's life fascinates me because the stories and characters are so compelling. From the trial of her father's corpse in front of the Scottish Parliament, to her disastrous honeymoon with Bothwell where she wore mourning for her lost love, to her later contented relationship with Alexander, or her worries for her grandson Donald of the Troubles – this story of one woman brings history to life.

Note: *Daughters of the North: Jean Gordon and Mary, Queen of Scots* is published by Whittles Publishing. Softback details: ISBN 9781849956017, £16.99. Also available as an e-book and audiobook.