

Marjorie Chibnall

Marjorie Chibnall, who has died aged 96, was a medieval historian remarkable almost as much for her longevity in her field as for her scholarship.



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She was known for her many studies of Anglo-Norman history, including, most notably, her mighty six-volume edition and translation of the Norman chronicler Orderic Vitalis's *Ecclesiastical History*, published between 1969 and 1980 — the product of 30 years of painstaking work.

Her first publications, a series of papers on alien priories (English religious houses under the control of a mother house abroad) began before the Second World War, and she continued to publish into her 90s. Her last book *The Normans*, published in 2006 when she was 91, won praise from a reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* as 'a masterly work, the most elegant and concise account of Norman history currently in print'.

For many years 'Mrs Chibnall' was a much-loved director of studies in History and mother hen to generations of undergraduates at Girton College, Cambridge, inspiring her students with her combination of imaginative thought, detailed scholarship and kindness. Her supervisions, whether at her home on the University Farm, in the 'hyphen' at Girton and even, on occasions, in the maternity home where she gave birth to her children, were for many students their first contact with a scholar. If the long pauses that occasionally yawned as she looked for a passage in a text or waited for a student to find the right words tested the nerves, her gentleness and humour always smoothed away any awkwardness. Many remained friends long after graduation.

But it was her work on Orderic Vitalis (1075 – c. 1142) that was her most important contribution to medieval scholarship. The Benedictine monk began his great work sometime between 1110 and

1115 when his superiors at the Norman monastery of St Evroul-en-Ouche ordered him to write the history of St Evroul.

This work, the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, grew until it became a general history of his own age, full of vivid narrative, unexpected digressions and fascinating character sketches, throwing light on the manners and ideas of the early 12th century. It has been described as the greatest English social history of the Middle Ages, and Marjorie Chibnall's edition turned it into an essential resource for scholars tackling topics ranging from Norman politics to monastic foundation, gender history to medieval historiography.

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Marjorie McCallum Morgan was born on September 27, 1915, at Atcham, Shropshire, where Orderic Vitalis himself had been born 840 years earlier. Educated at Shrewsbury Priory County Girls' School, she went up to Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, where she was taught by Evelyn Jamison, V. H. Galbraith and other notable medievalists.

Her first interests were ecclesiastical law and administration. Later, influenced by Eileen Power, she turned her attention to the alien priories. Her first two books, *The English Lands of the Abbey of Bec* and its companion volume of *Select Documents*, arose out of her PhD and were published in 1946 and 1951 respectively.

The skills she had developed through working on administrative records and her alertness to the shifting meanings of words stood her in good stead when she tackled a new translation of John of Salisbury's *Memoirs of the Papal Court*, published in 1956.

By this time she had moved to Cambridge as a lecturer in history, following spells at Southampton and Aberdeen, and was already getting to grips with Orderic Vitalis.

In 1947 she had married Charles Chibnall, a distinguished biochemist and a widower with two young daughters. Chibnall was himself something of an amateur historian, later publishing *Richard de Badew and the University of Cambridge, 1315-1340*, about the Cambridge Vice-Chancellor who, in 1298, founded University Hall, the forerunner of Clare College.

It was their common interest in such matters that led to a meeting with Marjorie Morgan (undergraduate legend said they first met in the Round Room of the Public Record Office). They had two more children together and remained devoted to one another until Charles Chibnall's death in 1988. Their household in Cambridge was a lively one, but Marjorie Chibnall always found time to entertain students at parties and beautifully prepared 'Tripos' teas. She was an excellent cook.

In 1965 she decided that if she were to complete Orderic and fulfil her family responsibilities, she ought to give up undergraduate teaching, so she resigned her fellowship at Girton. Four years later she was elected to a research fellowship at Clare Hall, where she later became an official fellow. Her *Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis* was followed by *Charters and Customals of the Abbey of Holy Trinity, Caen* (1982) and *The World of Orderic Vitalis* (1984).

In 1985 colleagues and pupils presented her with a festschrift entitled *Tradition and Change* (edited by Diana Greenway, Christopher Holdsworth and Jane Sayers) to mark her 70th birthday. Many academics would have gone into well-earned retirement at this point, but not Marjorie Chibnall.

As well as a constant stream of essays and reviews, she published eight more books, including *Anglo-Norman England 1066-1166* (1986) and a new translation of *The Historia Pontificalis of John of Salisbury* (1986). *Empress Matilda* (1991) was the account of the life of the strong-willed daughter of Henry I, widow of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry V, wife of Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, and mother of Henry II of England, encompassing not only her life in England but her final quarter of a century, which was spent almost entirely in Normandy.

In 1994 she edited (with Leslie Watkiss) *The Waltham Chronicle: An Account of the Discovery of Our Holy Cross at Montacute and its Conveyance to Waltham*. Four years later she produced a new translation (with RHC Davis) of *The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers*. Her *Debate on the Norman Conquest* (1999), a lucid and succinct summary of the historiography of the great 'dividing line' of English history, was followed by *Piety, Power and History in Medieval England and Normandy* (2000), a collection of essays which she edited.

Marjorie Chibnall was a Fellow of the British Academy and was appointed OBE in 2004.

She is survived by her son and daughter and by her two stepdaughters.

Marjorie Chibnall, born 27 September 1915, died 23 June 2012