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"We are able to offer a huge range of courses in history, classics and archaeology – it doesn't matter which period you're interested in, you'll find it here" Dr Laura Stewart

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David Sutherland



MA in European History

Gained an MSc Bioinformatics with Systems Biology (distinction) November 2012 having graduated with a BA German (First) in July 2007 and completed a Creative Writing module, 2013

David Sutherland already had three degrees – two from Dundee and one from Queen Mary - when he started studying at Birkbeck. He has since added another two, both from Birkbeck, and is now studying for an MA European History. Aged 66, he has also recently translated a book, *The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript*, from German into English.

'I failed the Scottish 11+ - and that was a great motivator! Although I was let through on appeal I think I set out to prove everyone wrong – I certainly didn't go straight through the system.

'I studied Physics at my local university, Dundee, and stayed to do a PhD. I saw myself becoming a physicist, but became very interested in IT, then in its very early stages. I decided that was what I wanted to do and went to work for ICL [International Computers Ltd, now Fujitsu].

'I might have stayed in that job for life but I wanted to go to Germany. In the post-war years my school had actively encouraged pupils to think about reconciliation with Germany – we were taught German, rather than French, and I went on a German school exchange. My grandfather fought in the trenches in the First World War and my father was in the army in the Second World War. Given the changed circumstances it seemed worthwhile to live in Germany and help bury past differences.'

David went to work for ICL in Germany at the European Space Agency, and continued to work for them in Stuttgart and Nuremberg, before being headhunted to work for a well-known retailer in Switzerland. He became head of IT for his company but, after a bypass operation, was given early retirement in 2001.

'I came back to Britain and discovered my IT qualifications were not considered up to date. So I did a Masters in Internet Technology at Queen Mary in 2002 and worked as a designer/developer until 2009. I might not have pursued my interest in German but for my brother in law, who suggested doing a BA in German at Birkbeck. After finishing a day's work, I would head down to Birkbeck for the evening. I enjoyed the social environment and the opportunity to develop my reading. It was fascinating and great fun. Now I'm doing a Master's in European History!

The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript

'At the end of 2009 I was made redundant. After that, I felt I needed a break from IT and wondered what I could do. While I was studying for my German degree at Birkbeck I had read a book by a young German soldier, Dominik Richert, which told of his experiences during the First World War. At that time I thought it was strange that it hadn't been translated as I felt that it was a book British people should read. Now I had the time and the motivation to translate it and give it the attention it deserved.

'It is the story of someone who didn't want to go to war. When the war broke out, his father advised him never to volunteer for anything! He came from Alsace, and did what he had to do to survive. He eventually crossed no-man's land in 1918, surrendering to the French and returned to his home town – now a part of France – in 1919. He thought of deserting earlier, when he was on the Eastern Front, but he didn't trust the Russians.

'The book was written in the 1920s and a copy of the text was found in a military archive by someone studying for a PhD in modern German history in the 1980s. It was published in German in 1988. Because of local interest in Alsace, it was subsequently translated and published in French.

'I translated part of it and sent it to the book's German editors, who were very enthusiastic and put me in touch with Dominik's son, Ulrich Richert, who is now in his 90s. We corresponded and we were able to clear the book for publication in English.

'The task of translation took about six months, and my wife gave me helpful editorial advice. The German edition stops when Richert deserted to the French, but the actual narrative goes on for other 50 or so pages. Ulrich Richert kindly sent me the original typescript and I was able to produce a complete translation.

'It has been a tremendously interesting project and I'm delighted that the book has now been published by military publishers Pen & Sword. I believe it's a real contribution to understanding how people felt at that time in Germany. It helps us to see that in the First World War ordinary soldiers on both sides had very similar experiences.'

Studying for an MSc in Bioinformatics

'When I was working for my Physics PhD some of my fellow-students were working on the application of Crystallography to Biology – but, for me, this was the road not taken! So, when I had finished the translation, I decided I wanted to build on my IT skills and my science background to try to do something new - I was getting a bit bored and had nothing to keep me busy. So I decided to study for a Master's in Bioinformatics. I had enough knowledge of Chemistry and Physics to get started, but I didn't feel very confident, going back to science after nearly forty years. I am pleased to say that Birkbeck was positive and encouraging.

'Bioinformatics is IT applied to Biology. The big area is DNA and you can't deal with DNA without using a computer. I may be retired and in my 60s but I have something to offer, and studying is much better for me than volunteering in a charity shop! It means I can draw on my past experience to make a personal contribution.

Studying at Birkbeck

'At Birkbeck, whatever your age or background you are accepted. All age groups are represented. It is stimulating and a means of meeting people who share your interests. It is unlike any other university I have ever been to.'

'When I was an undergraduate, our professor said it was much more interesting for the teaching staff after the war, because mature people came to university who wouldn't take no for an answer. I got that at Birkbeck. Here you get a wide range of intelligent people who want to do well. People try to relate to each other.'

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