

## 525 Years in the Pursuit of Truth: A New History of The University of Aberdeen

### Episode 4

[00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

**Professor Michael Brown** [00:00:10] Hello and welcome to the latest episode of our series of podcast on history at the University of Aberdeen, I'm Professor Michael Brown, the co-director of the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies. And it's my great pleasure to introduce my colleague, Dr Bradford Bow, a Lecturer in Scottish history and the deputy director of the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies. Editor of the Collection of Common Sense and the Scottish Enlightenment and author of numerous articles on Aberdeen's common sense philosophy and its wider dissemination in America is an obvious choice to speak to us about developments at the university in the 18th century. In the century following the war, the two things the university was to move from being a hotbed of Jacobitism to a purveyor of the establishment ideology. But that transition was by no means inevitable. The pressure to conform to the new political settlement, seemingly copper fastened in the Union of Parliaments in 1707 was to be challenged in 1715 and again in 1745. So to the European influence of enlightened ideas was to bring in its dead the challenge of French Republican and subversion in the 1790's, while Scotland as a whole was to participate in the Enlightenment. And it was also to resist the allure of political revolution. Aberdeen, its university and the sociability it fostered was to develop its own unique inflexion on these developments. First, it was a hotbed of Jacobitism, and then in the later decades, it became a powerful voice of enlightenment ideas, albeit one informed by proto romantic ideas about the value of place locality history. Dr. Bow will act as an able guide to these remarkable developments, which still Aberdeen's openness to international influence. Germany is a remarkable cluster of thinkers gathered in the Wise Club and watched at the university as a whole on its way to fostering a new role for itself trained professional officeholders for the British state and its imperial administration.

**Dr Bradford Bow** [00:02:08] Founded by the professoriate of Kings and Marischal Colleges and 1758, the Aberdeen Philosophical Society known as the Wise Club, had transformed the Scottish Enlightenment, the proceedings of philosophical and literary societies were woven into the fabric of 18th century Scottish Enlightenment intellectual culture, and they served as forms for knowledge exchange. Following that Scottish pattern, the scientific cultivation of natural knowledge and the thoughts of the wise club members, which had included Thomas Reid, George Campbell and James Beattie, as well as another 13 members drawn from the Aberdeen professoriate that it had informed define in pursuit of a distinctive Aberdeen enlightenment. In this podcast, I shall contextualise the ways in which Reid had developed principles of common sense as an alumnus of Marischal, a regent at Kings and then a founding member of the Wise Club. The Aberdeen Enlightenment had originated from the Royal Commission of Visitations Purge of Jacobitism in 1770 that had recast the political and intellectual landscape of Aberdeen, the election of Colin McLaren as the Duncan Liddel Professor of mathematics in 1717, as well as the Regius appointment of George Turnbull as a regent in 1721, had transformed the curriculum in Marischal now from the belief that education in this country was upon a miserable footing. Turnbull's graduation thesis, which he had read before Marischal College students and 1723 and then in 1726, had introduced an alternative to the senseless metaphysical creeds of the scholastic model of education that had, in his view, enslaved young understanding's. In the opening lines of his 1723 philosophical thesis on the Association of Natural Science with moral philosophy, Turnbull argued that the real usefulness of any science in human life is to be measured by its relation to moral philosophy, which has been rightly called by wise men, the guide and parent of life.

[00:04:56] And he suggested that he lead the students in the investigation of the connection that that natural science had with moral philosophy. Following John Locke's essay concerning human understanding published in 1690, Turnbull argued that all of our ideas arise from either sensation or reflection. And he also appealed to Samuel Clark's Boyle Lectures on natural evolution from the belief that moral rightness is founded in nature. Turnbull's 1726 academic thesis on the most beautiful structure of the material and rational world refine this religiously orthodox belief that an understanding of natural knowledge was nothing other than an acquaintance with the mind, which most perfectly rules all things. Turnbull taught metaphysics as moral philosophy to Thomas Reid between 1723 and 1726, whereas Turnbull prepared Reid to become an anatomist of the mind, McLaren provided an exemplary model for Reid to follow as a Newtonian. After graduation, Reid had entered the ministry and then served as a clerk for the press party of Kincardine O'Neill between 1731 and 1733. He later returned to Marischal as the librarian and 1733, and he has a very rich legacy with that position, considering that his great great grandfather had endowed the funds for a librarian to exist at the college. So not only was he an alumnus, but he was a legacy of Marschal College. And then later on, after completing a tour of England in 1737, Reid's maternal cousin, James Gregory, who had served as the college Medicina, had arranged for King's College masters to present him with the charge of Newmachar. But the parishioners of Newmachar did not welcome Reid's ordination on May 12th, 1737, as an exemplar of the patronage system that they had resisted. Now, it had been said that the delivery of Reid's first sermon allegedly required a guard with a drawn sword to prevent the repeat of an earlier incident when masked men had violently thrown poor Reid into a horse pond.

[00:07:52] Yet Reid had gradually won over the support of his parishioners through 15 years of service. Yet he had spent most of that time engaged with different studies regarding mathematics, astronomy and especially Scottish moral philosophy. Once again, Reid owed his career progression to James Gregory when he replaced Alexander Riet as as a regent at Kings and 1751. As a student of Turnbull, Reid had led his colleagues at Kings to adopt a remarkably similar curriculum as his alma mater, which had recently completely reformed their model of education to follow a professorial model after both Edinburgh and also Glasgow in 1783. But Reid had refused to abandoned the regenting system because he believed that it was best suited for the pastoral care of young men and in particular young men as young as 11 and 12 and 13 who he believed required attention and at least continuity as they moved from their bajan studies through to the final magistrand year, so their four years of study. Now the difference of opinion between the virtues of old Aberdeen's residential college within the Regentine system versus the professorial specialisation of a civic university located in New Aberdeen, being Marischal College had ultimately doomed the Articles of Union in 1754. Now, within the 18th century, this marked the second time that Marishal and Kings had failed at it at an attempted union, the first one being in 1747 in response to a shortage of funds and students following the 1745 Jacobite rising now, even though that they failed with unifying both of the colleges to form a university similar to what had happened in 1641 with the founding of the Caroline University as kind of a homage to Charles the second, and also a reflection of the role of Jacobitism in the Northeast of Scotland.

[00:10:33] Now, in spite of that, the founding of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society in 1758 offered an alternative way in which the Aberdeen professoriate collaboratively set forth the philosophy of common sense, which was a religiously orthodox alternative to the mitigated scepticism of Scotland's great infidel, David Hume, and also the ideal theory more broadly. Now, I imagine many of you are atleast aware of David Hume's legacy and

maybe even his recent controversy regarding some of his works. But I should add that he was very controversial in the age in which he lived as well. So in his Treatise of Human Nature, published in three books between 1739 and 1740, humans saw Hume sought to revolutionise the science of man through the use of the experimental method of reasoning and an appeal to Lockean epistemology. He argued that impressions of observed objects and human behaviour created subjective ideas about their properties. Now, this subjectivity of impressions had led Hume to deny the existence of objective moral judgements and to propose that neither reasoning nor experience provided conclusive evidence of a supreme design. Now, huge scepticism alerted the wise club to the dangers of the ideal theory also shown in the selective works of Locke, George Berkeley, Renee Descartes and Nicholas Malebranche, Wise Club members associated the ideal theory with modern philosophical scepticism from the different ways in which it undermined commonly held beliefs. The use of the term common sense to describe mother wit or self evident beliefs mislead critics that common sense philosophy lacked sophistication. On the contrary, like Turnbull, common sense philosophers believed that the science of the human mind shed new light on the cultivation of natural knowledge in moral and natural worlds. They argued that God designed the human constitution with agency to improve faculties of the mind, and the origin of divinely inspired principles of common sense was self-evident.

[00:13:26] Reid considered the difficulty of a just philosophy of the human mind in relation to the general prejudices against David Hume system of the mind. In his first discourse that he read before The Wise Club on June 14th, 1758. In doing so, he sought to discover the simple and original principles of our Constitution in a system of the mind that enumerated the original perceptions and provided a clear explanation from them of the phenomena of human nature. Now, in addition to that, he also followed the Scottish philosophical tradition of teaching metaphysics as moral philosophy in warning his students at King's College that and I quote, a profound philosopher like Hume comes and tells us that common sense is a foolish judge and that it is not to be trusted as reliable testimony. End quote. Now, confronted with Hume's mitigated scepticism, Reid claimed that Hume's reasoning appeared to me to be just and there was no there was therefore a necessity to call into question the principles upon which it was founded or to admit the conclusion. From that conviction, he eventually countered Hume's treatise of human nature with his own enquiry into the mind on the principles of Common Sense, which was eventually published in 1764. Before that publication, Reid had sent Hugh Blair, who was a professor of rhetoric and Bellette at Edinburgh University and also a close friend of Hume as fellow members of the Select Society, as well as the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh. Now, he said Blair chapters from his magnum opus to pass along to Hume, as well as an introductory letter for Hume's consideration. Now, in this letter, Reid writes, and I quote, Your friendly adversaries, Drs. Campbell and Gerard, as well as Dr Gregory, returned their compliments to you. Respectfully, a little philosophical society here, of which all three are members is much indebted to you for its entertainment.

[00:16:14] If you write No More and morals, politics or metaphysics, I am afraid we would be at a loss for subjects, end quote. Reid had shared Hume's criticisms of Locke's ambiguous treatment of ideas as a placeholder for all the contents of the mind. And yet he was alarmed that rendering knowledge of the world wholly dependent on psychologically interdependent impressions, which led to ideas, made Hume system indefensible against philosophical scepticism. Now, the consequences of the ideal theory led Reid to enquire on this subject anew without any regard to a previous hypothesis, his version of common sense philosophy ridiculed the ideal theory best shown in book one of Hume's treatise, because it denied one or more self-evident principles of the divinely inspired human

constitution. Now, interestingly enough, Hume responded to Reid's draught chapters as well as his letter and Blair passed along Hume's review of Reid's unpublished enquiry in what was labelled an instance of candour and generosity to an antagonist. Now, in this partial review, Hume praised Reid's literary performance in a piece so deeply philosophical, even though that Hume later offered a complete answer to common sense philosophers and his 1777 edition of his enquiry concerning human understanding by claiming that if his philosophy was properly understood, that it wouldn't disturb human conduct in everyday life. Now, the ways in which Reid had challenged Hume's philosophy in the Wise Club without bitterness had contrasted sharply with Hume's view of that bigoted, silly fellow, James Beattie. Which my colleague, Professor Katherine Jones, will discuss in the next episode of this podcast series, ultimately one of the takeaways that I hope you will have from my particular talk is that the associational lives of the Wives Club members reflected the intellectual and institutional characteristics of the Aberdeen Enlightenment, which had produced Reid's philosophy of common sense.

[00:19:18] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.