

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

### Episode 5

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

**Dr Bradford Bow** [00:00:11] Hello, my name is Dr. Bradford Bow, and I'm a co deputy Director of the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies, which is sponsoring this new series of podcasts entitled '525 Years in the Pursuit of Truth: A New History of the University of Aberdeen'. In this episode, my colleague, Professor Catherine Jones, who holds a chair in Scottish literature at Aberdeen University, will examine the literary and philosophical works of James Beattie. As professor of moral philosophy and logic at Marischal College, Aberdeen, Beattie reacted to the infidelity of the Times and the writings of David Hume in particular, across his academic career and in a variety of genres such as his manuscript prose allegory entitled *The Castle of Scepticism*, which he had composed in 1767. She shall also examine Beattie's extraordinarily well-received essay entitled 'An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth An Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism', published in 1770, as well as his poem entitled 'The Minstrel' or the 'Progress of Genius'. Both book one and book two. The first being published in 1771 and the second in 1774, this podcast sheds new light not only on the debates that animated Kings and Marischal colleges in the 18th century, but also on the role of the Aberdeen Enlightenment in the development of romanticism in Scotland and beyond.

**Professor Catherine Jones** [00:02:18] In 1773, James Beattie, Professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic at Marischal College, Aberdeen, visited London to petition (successfully) for a royal pension on the back of his sudden fame as author of 'An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism' (1770), an attack on the 'infidelity' of the times, and the writings of David Hume in particular. While in London, Beattie sat for the preeminent English portrait painter of the age, Sir Joshua Reynolds, who, as Beattie wrote in a letter of 21st of August 1773 to the author Elizabeth Montagu, planned a sort of allegorical portrait of Beattie representing the triumph of truth over scepticism and infidelity. Exhibited in 1774 at the Royal Academy, Reynolds's 'The Triumph of Truth, with a Portrait of a Gentleman', shows Beattie, in his Oxford Doctor of Laws gown and band, dramatically lit against a stormy background; he smiles modestly and grips a copy of his book of philosophy, while beside him is The Angel of Truth, striking down three grotesque, dishevelled figures in the background.

[00:03:40] Beattie claimed that these figures represented Prejudice, Scepticism and, Folly, who are shrinking away from the light of the sun that beams on the breast of the angel. There was, however, some ambiguity in the identification. Beattie's biographer, Sir William Forbes, stated that they represented 'Sophism, Scepticism and Infidelity'. While he noted the people of lively imaginations' found in them the portraits of Voltaire and Hume, he insisted that he had 'reason to believe' that Reynolds 'had no such thought when he painted those figures'. Yet in a letter to Beattie of the 22nd of February 1774, Reynolds observed that Hume has heard that he is introduced in the picture not much to his credit, and commented 'There is only a figure covering his face with his hands, which they may call Hume or anybody else'. As for Voltaire, I intended he should be one of the group.

[00:04:46] Although, 'The Triumph of Truth' was mocked by some on its first exhibition for its suggestion that Beattie was a greater philosopher than Hume or Voltaire, Reynolds's picture captures an important aspect of Beattie's life and career, his quest for truth, which he pursued in both his philosophy and his poetry. 'My Prejudices', he wrote in his 'Essay on Truth', are all in favour of truth and virtue. Beattie included in the penultimate chapter of his 'Essay on Truth' a powerful denunciation of the evils of the slave trade. He went on to

draft the Marischal College petition to parliament in support of the campaign to abolish the slave trade in 1788.

[00:05:37] Born in Laurencekirk, Kincardineshire, the 24th of October 1735 Beattie was educated at Laurencekirk Parish School, before enrolling at Marischal College, to take the four year arts course. Beattie studied Greek under Thomas Blackwell, and moral philosophy and logic under Alexander Gerard. After graduating Master of Arts, he became village school master and parish clerk at Fordoun, about six miles from Laurencekirk. He also attended divinity classes at King's College, Aberdeen, most likely with a view to entering the church. Although Beattie gave up this idea, vindication of the Christian religion was central to all of his teaching and writing. It's significant that when, in the 1870s, new stained glass was commissioned for King's College Chapel by the now united colleges of King's and Marischal, one panel in the West Window (1875) shows the apostle Paul being instructed by Gamaliel (Acts 22.3), with George Campbell, Professor of Divinity and Principal of Marischal College, and Beattie above.

[00:06:48] Hume is remembered today as a greater philosopher than Beattie, and rightly so. In his *Essay on Truth*, he draws on many of the arguments of Thomas Reid, Hume's most formidable antagonist, who had established 'Common Sense' as a philosophical position, in opposition to Hume. Beattie, however, does not have the cool analytical skills of Reid, and relies in his *Essay on Truth* on rhetoric rather than logic to expose the sophistry of Hume. Beattie is more interesting as an essayist, where he aims at a more general audience. In 1711, Joseph Addison, co-founder of the influential periodical *The Spectator*, declared himself 'ambitious to have it said that I have brought Philosophy out of Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at tea-tables and in Coffee Houses'. Philosophers of the mid 18th century followed Addison in their mutual confidence in themselves and their readers. The persona Addison adopted in *The Spectator* also provided for Beattie and others 'the model combination of piety without bigotry and taste, without pageantry'.

[00:08:17] Many of Beattie's essays had their origins in discourses given to the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, or 'Wise Club', established in January 1758. Beattie first presented the ideas that would form his essay 'On Poetry and Music', for example, at The Wise Club on the 23rd November 1762 and the 24th of January 1764, when he spoke on the 'principles which determine our degrees of approbation in the fine arts'. These two discourses were, in part, a response to the 'rage' for the poems of Ossian, collected by James Macpherson as 'Fragments of Ancient Poetry' (1760) and Beattie's own sense of their inferior merit when set in relation to what he termed the 'highest species of poetry', represented by Milton, Homer or Shakespeare. Beattie also engages with contemporary debates about the relative value of vocal to instrumental music, drawing on his experience of music making in the Aberdeen Musical Society, as an accomplished singer and instrumentalist, he played cello and flute.

[00:09:28] Beattie published a collection of his essays in 1776: the volume included 'On Poetry and Music', 'On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition', and 'On the Usefulness of Classical Learning'. William Rose, in the *Monthly Review*, welcomed the volume's display of sound judgement and intimate knowledge of ancient and modern poetry, as well as for the evident marks of the sensibility, benevolence and piety of the ingenious writer. Beattie also published in periodicals contributing, for example, 'An Essay on Dreams' to Henry MacKenzie's *The Mirror*, in 1780 under the pseudonym 'Insomniosus', a revised and expanded version of the essay appeared in Beattie's *Dissertations: Moral and Critical* in 1783. Interestingly, the entry on Dreaming in the third edition of the *Encyclopaedia*

Britannica (1797) recommended Beattie's 'valuable essay on the subject'. Beattie optimistically, advocates temperance, virtue and pious thought as a recipe for 'sweet slumbers and easy dreams'. He may also, however, have been the source of the Encyclopaedia's view that uneasy sleep acts as a cautionary signal to the dreamer, that something is wrong 'in the constitution'. Beattie's dream theories resurface in the period Gothic fiction: for example, Philadelphia novelist Charles Brockden Brown's 'Wieland: or, The Transformation (1798)'.

[00:11:08] Beattie used the form of the dream vision to attack sceptical philosophy in an unpublished prose satire, 'The Castle of Scepticism', which he composed in 1767, as a diversion from the task of writing *The Essay on Truth*. *The Castle of Scepticism* depicts him as governor of a gloomy, enchanted castle who dupes his too-willing prisoners into thinking that the pleasant countryside outside is a land of prejudice and error. The end of the satire brings the dreamer back to his present circumstances with a reference to his own piety, personifying the inherent value of religion as an antidote to sceptical philosophy.

[00:11:56] In a letter to Captain Mercer of the 26 November 1769, Beattie, having recently completed his *Essay on Truth*, wrote: 'I am like a man who has escaped from the mines and is now drinking in the fresh air and light, on top of some of the mountains of Dalecarlia'. Composing his two-volume poem, *The Minstrel or the Progress of Genius*, was Beattie's refreshment. The subject matter of the poem is education and the development of the imagination of its poet-hero Edwin, a minstrel of the 'north countrie'. Beattie chose to write the poem in the style of Edmund Spenser because he found Spenserian stanza particularly musical to the ear. Beattie emphasises in *The Minstrel* the restorative power of nature. But he also pays tribute to the Wise Club, as he reflects in the voice of the narrator on the development of his own character as philosopher and poet.

[00:13:00] Blessed be the day I 'scaped the wrangling crew,  
From Pyrrho's maze, and Epicurus's sty;  
And held high converse with the god like few,  
Who to th'enraptur'd heart,  
and ear, and eye, Teach beauty, virtue, truth and love,  
and melody.

[00:13:23] While Beattie's poetry is not much read today, *The Minstrel* was one of the most important early influences on the celebrated English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, Beattie anticipated Wordsworth in arguing for the power of places in summoning up memories. *The Minstrel* also stands behind the work of another Aberdonian poet of the Age of Enlightenment and Romanticism, George Gordon, Lord Byron, notably his long narrative poem in the Spenceserian tradition, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-18).

[00:14:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.