

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

Episode 7

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

Professor Michael Brown Hello and welcome to the latest episode of Five Hundred and twenty Five Years in the Pursuit of Truth, A New History of the University of Aberdeen. I'm Professor Michael Brown, and on this occasion, it gives me great pleasure to be able to introduce my colleague, Professor Cairns Craig. Professor Craig is the Glucksman professor of Irish and Scottish studies here at the University of Aberdeen, where he is also a director of the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies, a noted cultural critic, literary critic, Professor Craig is the general editor of the four volume history of Scottish Literature. He's also the author of numerous works of cultural criticism, notably *Intending Scotland: Explorations in Scottish Culture since the Enlightenment*, which appeared in 2009, and more recently, *The Wealth of the Nation, Scotland Culture and Independence*, which appeared in 2018. He is also the author of close studies of Individual Writers, notably on Ian Banks and most recently, Muriel Spark. A fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and of the British Academy there is no better figure to write or to speak to us today about a founding figure in the study of English literature across the United Kingdom. The professor of English literature here at the University of Aberdeen at the turn of the 19th to 20th century, Herbert Grierson.

Professor Cairns Craig [00:01:31] I'm Cairns Craig, Glucksman Professor of Irish and Scottish Studies at the University of Aberdeen since 2005. And this podcast, I want to describe the achievements of one of the most influential Aberdeen professors in the arts, Sir Herbert J.C. Grierson, 1866 - 1960, who held regius chair in English literature at Aberdeen from 1895 - 1915.

[00:02:00] English literature had been a very minor discipline in the 19th century university curriculum, evolving slowly from a traditional conception of rhetoric that had been developed in the 18th century by thinkers such as George Campbell and associate of Thomas Reid and one of the members of the Wise Club during the Aberdeen Enlightenment. Indicative of the status of English literature was the appointment in 1860 of Alexander Bain as both professor of logic and English literature.

[00:02:29] This claim to the chain of logic depended on John Stuart Mills acknowledgement, Bain's assistance in the completion of Mills influential *A System of Logic* of 1843. His claim to a chain of English literature was based apparently on nothing more than that, he could write lucidly in English. Whatever titles were attached to his post, he was, in fact appointed because of the success of his work, *Psychology, the Senses and the Intellect* of 1855 and the *Emotions and the*

will 1859. Indeed Bain is now widely regarded as one of the earliest exponents of the discipline of psychology as something quite separate from the philosophy of mind. Being viewed English literature, however, in an almost entirely utilitarian fashion is sought to make his students aware of the principles of style. The examples drawn from the history of literature and English principles, which he hoped would improve the stylistic qualities of their own writing.

[00:03:31] In 1889, however, the Scottish Universities Commission recommended that English literature be treated as a separate discipline. And Aberdeen moved quickly with the help of the Chalmers family, who provided the funding to establish a new chair in the subject. Since no one had ever been trained in the discipline of English literature, those who first held professorships in the subjects were mostly journalists and reviewers like David Masson in Edinburgh and his successor, George Sainsbury. The man whom Aberdeen appointed was a 27 year old who had degrees in classics from both Aberdeen and Oxford, and he would only ever taken a one term course in English literature during his time as an Aberdeen undergraduate. Initially appointed as an interim lecturer, Greeson a Shetlander became the first chamish professor of English literature in 1895, an outcome underpinned not only by his successful career at Oxford, but by some assiduous politicking amongst influential figures in Aberdeen itself. It was, however, precisely because of his lack of qualifications and the discipline he had been appointed to teach, that Grierson was driven to prove his worth by research and publication rather than just through his teaching. Asked, for instance, to write a book on the first half of the 17th century for a series called European literature, Grierson decided that he could not do justice to the topic unless he could give Dutch literature the same level of attention he was giving to the other major European latitudes.

[00:05:13] He went to Holland, hired a tutor and returned expert in Dutch language and literature. In his autobiography, *Vita Mea* he tells us this fulfilled an interest that went back to his childhood. I felt tempted to undertake it from an interest in the Dutch people dating back to earliest years when the harbour of my native town was crowded with Dutch fishing boats every summer and its narrow streets thronged with their picturesque costumes. It is fair to say that the success of his academic publications between 1895 and the First World War retrospectively justified the apparently risky decision to appoint someone so young and inexperienced. First, however, he had to invent courses for the discipline that barely existed. And what he decided to offer his students was what he himself would later describe as English literature from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf. Indeed, according to Professor David Dikkers, one of Grierson's students in the 1930s, the very distinguished contributor to literary studies in the decades after the Second World War, Grierson not only had to invent English studies at Aberdeen, but in doing so was in fact the inventor of English studies in the U.K.. The kind of historical course isn't an established at Aberdeen taking

his students from the earliest examples of Anglo-Saxon literature challenging of contemporary authors became the norm in Anglophone universities until the 1970s and 80s.

[00:06:53] It was not, however, for his creation of a widely adopted English studies curriculum that Grierson became internationally famous in the first half of the 20th century. His fame was based on the publication by Oxford University Press in 1912 of an edition of the poetry of John Donne. Donne had been regarded as a minor poet in the English tradition, his work characterised as metaphysical and obscure and were not obscure in poor taste because of its explicitly sexual imagery. Grierson's edition, with its long introduction, providing not only a historical and intellectual context for Donne's work, but a psychological interpretation of Donne as the poet of a new intellectual era was a striking rewriting of the history of English literature making Donne the most important poet between Shakespeare and Milton. Grierson's explanatory notes dispel the accusations of obscurity that had undermined Donne's reputation with earlier critics and made an immediate impression on some of the most important poets of the period. W.B. Yeats, for instance, looked to Grierson that I find that at last I can understand Donne, your notes, tell me exactly what I want to know, poems I could not understand or could but vaguely understand or now clear. I notice that the more precise and learnt the thought, the greater the beauty, the passion, the intricacy and subtleties of his imagination are the lengths and depths of the fuddle made by his passion is patently and his obscenity, the rock and loom of his Eden but make the more certain that one who is but a man like us has seen God.

[00:08:40] The impact of Grierson's edition on Yeats's own poetry was immediate and reshaped Yeats's dreamy Celtic twilight style into some of the most hard edged and direct poems of the early 20th century. Donne typically used a dramatic and colloquial mode of addressing his poems as in this from *The Canonization*. For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love, or chide my palsy, or my gout, My five grey hairs, or ruined fortune flout, with wealth your state, your mind with arts improve. Take you a course, get you a place so you will let me love.

[00:09:22] Such techniques are adopted by Yeats, many of his politically engaged and publicly oriented poems, the 1910s such as *September 1913*. What need you, being come to sense, but fumble in a greasy till, and a halfpence to the pence, And prayer to shivering prayer, until You have dried the marrow from the bone. At least in part, Yeats's to become a modern poet by studying Grierson's Donne. Grierson argued that what was distinctive and Donne was a deep knowledge of and respect for tradition, together with an awareness of the advances in contemporary science. Donne this and argued was the most mediaeval of English poets and at the same time the most modern. The discordance between the two was what made his poetry so

challenging, and that combination of tradition and modernity would become the aim of many of the poets of the interwar period.

[00:10:23] It is very rarely that a scholarly edition of a long, dead and much neglected poet transforms both the modern understanding of literary history and the practise of contemporary poets and critics. But that was exactly what Grierson's edition did. By the 1940s, the distinguished American scholar of the Renaissance Mantooth could rhetorically enquire 30 years after its publication, without any introduction to a scholarly edition of an early English poet ever had a more marked influence upon contemporary criticism of contemporaries than Grierson's have done had on others. The answer was clearly none, an answer underlined by T.S. Eliot when he sent an edition of his collected poems to Grierson, inscribed with the words to whom all Englishmen of letters are indebted. Eliot's own debt was particularly profound, his most famous essay, Tradition on the individual talent from 1919 applied Grierson's terminology to the situation of contemporary poets, and in 1921, Eliot reviewed Grierson's Anthology of Metaphysical Lyrics, a collection that set Donne's work alongside those who were influenced by him, and in his review, Eliot coined the notion of the dissociation of sensibility to account for why Donne's poetry was so much more vital than the English poetry of the next several centuries. I thought to Donne, you wrote was an experience and while the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new holes. Eliot's most famous poem, The Wasteland, published in 1922, only shortly after his review of Grierson's editions, exploits the notion of tradition by being full of echoes of those metaphysical poets whom Grierson had propelled into public prominence. Two decades later, another major critic F.R. Leavis spoke for many when reading through Grierson's metaphysical lyrics, he declared that when we reach done, we adopt an entirely different attitude because we cease to lead as students and lead on as we lead the living.

[00:12:45] By inspiring such responses, Grierson's edition did not just influence how poetry was written and decades after its publication, but inspired a whole new set of critical methodology as to how poems should be read, analysed and valued. This was pioneered in Britain by I.A. Richards, whose principles of literary criticism was published in 1924, and Richard Donne, Grierson's version of Donne as the prime example of what poetry could and should always attempt to do. Richards believes that poetry worked by what he described as the interanimations of language, which he defined as the relevant interaction between individual units of meaning, but revealed how poetry could have overcome the fragmentation of the modern mind and reunite the whole man by the affections and the faculties. Donne's, use of supplies and conjunctions of different, often discordant planes of imagery should have proved they could generate experiences that allowed the modern reader to recover the psychological wholeness which Grierson had argued done

exemplifies. This is his favourite term interanimation was, however, a word that Grierson himself had decided was the best reading of Donne's now famous poem, *The Ecstasy*. When love with one another so interinanimates two souls, that abler soul, which thence doth flow, defects of loneliness controls. No previous editor had chosen to print interinanimates than the more common in animates. But interinanimates Christian belief fitted better with Donne's philosophy of love, transcendental potential, as well as better fulfilling the deliberate roughness of his medical experiments.

[00:14:45] The Oxford English Dictionary gives Donne's use of this word, or at least appearance in the language and dates it to 1630, but it would be fairer to say that it actually dates from 1912, since Grierson had effectively invented a term that fitted with his interpretation of Donne's work. Richards's adoption of certain animations to describe the psychological power of poetry was to be the springboard for what came to be known in the 1940s as the new criticism, particularly way of reading, analysing, situating poems that aimed at revealing the special quality of their profound inner unity. It was a way of reading poetry that went back not to Donne himself, but to young Aberdeen professors relentless effort to establish the best method by which the correct text and the full meaning of the work of an obscure 17th century English poet could be made available to modern readers. To achieve this isn't even used his expertise in Dutch literature by comparing 17th century Dutch translations of Donne's poems with their manuscript versions in order to understand how Donne's contemporaries would have understood his works.

[00:16:02] In Lerwick, the young Herbert Grierson had been brought up in a strictly evangelical household, but his commitment to Christianity was undermined by his experience as an undergraduate at Aberdeen. The university then still resonated with the Hennesy trial of William Robertson Smith, later editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. For his insistence that the Bible should be read as a historical document rather than the eternal word of God. Robertson Smith himself an Aberdeen graduate was eventually ousted from his professorship in the free church college in Aberdeen. The tension between Christian belief and modern scientific discoveries was one of the things that Grierson found inspiring and done, as well as in the work of some of the other poets whose writings he edited, particularly by Tennyson. In each of them, he discerned the struggle of literary creativity to free itself from a Puritan resistance to the celebration of earthly beauty and the joys of bodily existence. In Donne's poetry he found both, and so did the generation of leaders who, after the First World War, discovered in Grierson's on a poet who could give voice to the contradictions and possibilities of their own experience. One of those who attended Grierson's lectures in Aberdeen was Nan Shepherd. Now most famous for her book, *The Living Mountain*, in her first novel, *The Quarry Wood*, she provides us with a description of

Grierson's lecturing style and his impact on those who were coming of age in the north of Scotland in the early 20th century.

[00:17:42] Shepard's heroine, Martha, who's from a northeast farmhouse to become a student at Aberdeen and takes English literature as one of our courses. This is how Shepherd describes the professor. He spoke like a torrent, he digressed the coverage himself, shot straight ahead, digressed again, he forgot his audience, turning farther and farther down until he stood side onto them, gazing through the window. Then suddenly, he would turn back upon the class with a wrinkling smile and a swift, amused aside and a roll of laughter with eyes to the roof. While the feet thundered on the floor. His theme was English literature. But to Martha, it seemed that he was speaking the language of some immortal and happy isle, some fabulous tongue that she was enabled by miracle for once to comprehend. Martha comes away from the lecture feeling bruised and dizzy, as though from travelling too rapidly through the year, an impression produced by Clinton's ability to link literature and English books to the classical lectures and philosophies he has studied, but also to the wide range of European literatures with which he was by this time familiar. Martha's discovery of some fabulous tongue was a local version of what had happened to the most important poets and the most influential critics of the first half of the 20th century when they encountered Grierson's edition of Don. And since Donne remains one of the most studied figures in English literature and one of the most admired by modern poets, few Aberdeen University professors have had such a long lasting impact on both the creative and historical potential of their disciplines, as did Herbert Grierson.

[00:19:35] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.