

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

## Episode 8

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

**Dr. Bradford Bow** [00:00:12] 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 Five Hundred and Twenty Five Years in the Pursuit of Truth A New History of the University of Aberdeen. In this episode, I am delighted to introduce my colleague, Professor Keith Bender, who holds the SIRE chair in economics at Aberdeen University. Professor Bender will examine the life of the early 20th century Aberdonian banker and philanthropist Sir Thomas Jaffrey. In doing so, he reflects on the centenary of the Department of Economics by exploring the seven people who have held the Jaffrey chair in political economy.

**Keith Bender** [00:01:12] Hello, my name is Keith Bender, and I'm the SIRE Professor of Economics at the University of Aberdeen. In this podcast, I want to talk about the history of economics at the university and especially about a local Aberdonian, Sir Thomas Jaffrey, without whose generosity, the lasting legacy of economics at the University would have been a lot different.

[00:01:32] This year, the University of Aberdeen is celebrating five hundred and twenty five years since Bishop William Elphinstone established the University based on a foundational purpose of being, quote, 'open to all and dedicated to the pursuit of truth and the service of others'. The Department of Economics is also celebrating an anniversary this year, the establishment of the Jaffrey Chair in Political Economy, which was instituted by Ordinance on the 22nd of October 1920 after a generous donation of twenty thousand pounds by Thomas Jaffrey. Sadly, it seems that Sir Thomas is a forgotten figure in Aberdeen's past, which is surprising given that at the turn of the 20th century he was clearly one of the most respected businessmen and philanthropists in the city. Indeed, as we will see his philosophy on civic life parallels, well, the sentiments given in the University's foundational purpose. In what follows, I will give a brief summary of his contributions to Aberdeen, to the university and a bit of insight on the seven people who have held the chair that he established one hundred years ago.

[00:02:38] Thomas was born to Thomas Jaffrey and Leslie Wink on the 6th of February 1855. The elder Thomas was a railway inspector for the Great North of Scotland Railway Company. Thomas had four sisters, Jane, Agnes, Leslieana and Margaret, and one brother, Robert Leslie, who would later become a graduate of the University of Aberdeen.

[00:02:58] Nothing is known of Thomas's education. It is certainly likely that he went to a local secondary school. But while his brother went to the Aberdeen Grammar School, there's no record of Thomas attending the grammar. He most likely left school to be an apprentice accountant starting at the north of Scotland Bank in 1877.

[00:03:16] While there, he met and married Margaret Tough in 1887, a happy union that lasted until her death 43 years later. First living at Ingleside in Rubushlaw Den South, Thomas and Margaret lived much of their married life in Edgehill house in Milltimber. It was on a large estate known for its extensive gardens. It also housed a large, if eclectic, art collection built over years of travel in Scotland and abroad. His view of art was simple, as

he was guided by this maxim, quote, 'If a picture does not give me joy, I have no use for it.'

[00:03:53] Thomas was a banker by trade, which gives us our first link to economics or political economy, as it was better known then. As mentioned, he was first employed with the north of Scotland Bank in 1877 at the West End branch and was promoted to accountant in 1881. Soon after he moved to the up and coming Aberdeen Savings Bank on Exchange Street, Aberdeen Savings Bank was founded in 1815 as a bank for the working class catering for small depositors. Jaffrey was successful in the bank, ascending to the post of Actuary in 1892, a position that he held for 37 years until his retirement in nineteen twenty nine under his careful management. He modernised banking operations and greatly expanded the depositor base.

[00:04:42] In one of his biggest contributions to the bank, Jaffrey oversaw the building of a new headquarters for the savings bank on Union Terrace in 1896. You can still see the carved words savings bank on the building on Union Terrace today. The building was designed by Sir William Kelly, the architect who designed many Aberdeen buildings, as well as the Leopard's on Union Bridge, the so-called "Kelly's Cats". And it opened to great fanfare.

[00:05:11] Due to his importance in leading one of the most important banks in the city and the fifth largest savings bank in the UK, Jaffrey had the opportunity to meet national dignitaries when they came to Aberdeen, including meeting U.S. Ambassador Joseph Kennedy, father of future U.S. President John F. Kennedy, when he visited Aberdeen for the Seabury Memorial celebrations at St. Andrew's Cathedral in 1938. He also hosted Lloyd George and Winston Churchill during their visits to Aberdeen. There's a wonderful newsreel at the National Library of Scotland website of Churchill's visit to Aberdeen to receive the freedom of the city in 1946, where Churchill is shown planting a tree with Jaffrey at Edgehill. Clearly, Jaffrey was a leading local businessman, but he felt a great duty to give back to his hometown among his many philanthropic activities, along with Lord and Lady Cowdry, he made a substantial donation of twenty five thousand pounds in 1927 to the Aberdeen Joint Hospital Fund for a hospital for sick children at a maternity hospital. This eventually became Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, perhaps his most lasting contributions to Aberdeen Civic life was as a member of the Aberdeen Art Gallery Committee. He was chair of the committee from 1928 until 1951 when he oversaw both an expansion of the building and of the collection. Even after his time as Chair, Jaffrey and his estate continued contributing to the gallery with over 20 pieces of artworks being donated to the collection and a fund set up in his name, contributing to at least 15 purchases of artwork.

[00:06:50] Jaffrey started his relationship with the University as part of the court advisory committee in Commerce. He was appointed to court in 1924 as erectors assessor and remained on court until 1937. During that time, he was also involved in the newly designed memorial for Bishop Elphinstone, while the University founder's tomb was significantly damaged during the Reformation. It was not until 1909 that there were serious discussions about a new memorial in the chapel. The plan was for it to be installed by 1931 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Elphinstone birth. The artist Henry Wilson was engaged in 1918 to create the memorial, but delivered a much larger than expected monument. Parts of it were installed in the chapel in the mid 1920s, but it was clear that it was far too large for that space. Since the memorial committee had spent all of its funds, Jaffrey gave a £1000 to rebuild the memorial in the Ante-Chapel with work starting in 1929, it was completed in time for the anniversary celebrations. The memorial remained in the Ante-Chapel until it was moved to its more familiar location outside of the chapel in 1946 when

the War Memorial and the Ante-Chapel was expanded to include those who had fallen during World War Two.

[00:08:10] It was during this time of involvement with the University that he donated the £20,000 pounds to endow the Jaffrey chair in political economy in October 1920, just over 100 years ago, political economy, as it was more commonly referred to then, have been taught as a subject since at least 1901. At the time of Jaffrey's gift, it was being taught by Mr R.B. Forrester and, interestingly, by one of the earlier female lecturers on staff, Miss Annie McDonald. At this point, political economy was part of a recently established 'Degree in Commerce'. Economics appeared in other parts of the University as well, with lectures in Economic History being taught elsewhere in the University.

[00:08:52] While one would have assumed the Jaffrey would be quite keen on supporting this applied Commerce degree, his interests seem more aligned with theories of Political Economy. In a letter to then principal, the Reverend George Adam Smith, Jaffrey states that he wanted the chair to be, quote, 'a competent scholar, academically trained in the History and Theory of economics, whose exposition should not be of a partisan character, but fitted, rather, to give a fair treatment to the views of all schools of Political Economy, thus affording the two students of the subject the materials and guidance needful for their education and Economic History and in the economic theories prevailing throughout the world'.

[00:09:36] This vision was realised by the establishment of the MA Political Economy renamed the MA in Economics in the 1980s, and the seven people who have held the Chair. To give a sense of this, let me give a brief biography of each of these more than competent scholars.

[00:09:55] Professor Sir Alexander Gray was the first Jaffrey chair, holding it from 1921 to 1934. Professor Gray was educated at Edinburgh before joining the UK Civil Service. He wrote that he was not intending to take up the chair when he was short listed. Indeed, he tried to withdraw his application, but the principle was very persuasive. In his career at Aberdeen and then at Edinburgh, Sir Alexander was an influential economist, especially around his research on the history of economic thought and particularly on the Scottish moral philosopher and early political economist Adam Smith. However, outside economics, he's best known for his poetry, both in Scots and in English. Perhaps his best known poem is entitled 'Scotland', with its famous stanza: 'This is my country, the land that begat me, These windy spaces are surely my own, and those who here toil in the sweat of their faces, are flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone'.

[00:11:00] Professor Lindley Fraser held the chair from 1935 until 1945. He studied classics at Oxford and received a PhD in economics in the USA. He returned to Oxford to teach. One of his students was future prime minister Harold Wilson. But he took up the Jaffrey chair in 1935. Like Sir Alexander, his primary contributions to economics for around economic thought, particularly in the rhetoric of economic theory. Also, like Sir Alexander, is known for activities outside of economics, especially during his secondment run during World War Two to head up the BBC German language service. After the war, he remained at the BBC in London, giving up the chair in 1945.

[00:11:44] The third chair from 1945 to 1965 was Professor Henry Hamilton before taking the chair he was already well known at the University as he had held a lectureship in Economic History since 1925. Thus, his area of research was more historically oriented, particularly around the Scottish Industrial Revolution. Perhaps more importantly for the

discipline, though, during this time, there was a significant expansion of political economy at Aberdeen and Professor Hamilton was a central figure in Aberdeen's administration, serving as a dean and a member of court.

[00:12:20] The next chair after Professor Hamilton was Professor Max Gaskin, who held the chair from 1965 to 1984, unlike the two earliest chairs, Professor Gaskin was famous before taking up the chair as he was a decorated airman from World War Two, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross with the Bar flying over 16 missions as part of bombing raids in Europe. He was also a past president of the Scottish Economic Society and served as an economic consultant for the Secretary of State for Scotland from 1965 until 1987. His research speciality was initially on banking, which no doubt would have made Sir Thomas very happy. But he also wrote one of the first significant economic analyses on the impact of North Sea oil discoveries on Aberdeen and Scotland, an area of research that continues to be a central one in the department.

[00:13:13] Professor Peter Sloane held the chair from 1984 until 2002. Professor Sloan started the recent tradition of the Jaffrey chair being focussed on labour market economics, announcing another long held research speciality in the department. He was a longtime head of department and Vice-Principal and Dean of faculty during his time at Aberdeen. Authoring or editing 30 books, 43 book chapters and over 100 peer reviewed journal articles is one of the most widely published of the Jaffrey chairs.

[00:13:45] After a couple of year break, the University recruited Professor Tim Barmby from the University of Durham in 2004, holding the chair until his retirement in 2016. Also known for his extensive research on Labour economics, he has particular research expertise on absenteeism, tournaments and firm hierarchies. Latterly, he has developed an interest in the economic history of labour contracts during the Industrial Revolution. He served as the managing editor of the Scottish Journal of Political Economy, the journal for the century old Scottish Economic Society.

[00:14:19] Professor Catia Montagna became the department's first woman chair of economics when she joined from Dundee University in 2013 and then became the first female Jaffrey chair in 2018. She has kept the recent tradition of an interest in Labour economics research in the chair, but has broadened it to focus on the interaction between globalisation, industrial relations and redistributive policies in determining labour market outcomes and aggregate performance. She is currently co-managing editor of the Scottish Journal of Political Economy and was recently named as a fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences.

[00:14:56] Each of these Professors contributed significantly to the development and growth in economics in Aberdeen, while many subjects are covered, as mentioned earlier, the department has long held research expertise and labour economics and energy economics, the latter particularly around oil and gas, but more recently incorporating a broader focus on energy. In the last 15 years it also established the first experimental lab in economics in Scotland, the Scottish Experimental Economics Laboratory. All of these areas complement the desire of Jaffrey to establish the chair he endowed and the body of academics that have shaped the discipline and students over the past one hundred years. Principal Smith's response to Sir Thomas's gift is as relevant today as it was then when he said that he wanted to, quote, 'express my own gratification, that Jaffrey's name is to be permanently associated with the University and a department of so great importance to the national life'. There is no doubt that Sir Thomas would be proud of the accomplishments of the department that he so generously funded. I'll leave you with one final view of him. The

University of Aberdeen was given a painting of Sir Thomas, which at one time hung at the Aberdeen Savings Bank building on Union Terrace. It was painted by David Foggie in 1942. It shows an older Sir Thomas, but his earnest and clear gaze still holds the observer. He looks sharp in a suit and he's ready to take notes of his next conversation, as it will no doubt be something worthy of his time and great gifts. Consistent with the University's foundational purpose, Jaffrey was quick to offer his service to good causes. Indeed, service was clearly a foundational purpose for Jaffrey, as shown in a reflection on Jaffrey's life found in the Aberdeen University review, Jaffrey said, quote, 'I have always been of the opinion that every citizen should regard it as his duty, as surely as it is his privilege to devote at least a part of his means to public, civic and charitable causes and to spend a measure of his physical and mental gifts in the service of his neighbours'. Jaffrey's legacy has touched generations of academics and students in economics at the University of Aberdeen and continues to influence the broader discipline that he so admired. Thank you very much.

[00:17:23] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.