Natasha is one in a million

On January 16 2013, the University of Aberdeen’s Sir Duncan Rice Library reached an important milestone as it welcomed its millionth visitor through the doors.

Fourth year psychology student Natasha Sangha (21) was heading to the library for some last minute revision when she took her place in the library’s history.

Running 20 minutes behind schedule proved lucky for ...
We have lots of lovely buildings on campus, but the library is definitely my favourite. It’s a fantastic place to study and when it comes to exam time I feel like I practically live in it.

When the library first opened, I couldn’t wait to get back to University so I could see it and it really is stunning, so to now be part of its history is a fantastic honour. It certainly livened up my morning revision plan!

Chris Banks added, “I am delighted that the library has now welcomed its millionth visitor through its doors and Natasha will now be part of the library’s history.

“Since we began using the new building in September 2011, we have seen a 52% rise in the number of people using the library and a huge 202% increase in non members visiting the building.

“The number of students using the library is also much higher than previously, which is fantastic as the university is extremely proud of the building and it is great that others are enjoying it too.”

The book presented to Natasha was edited by three University of Aberdeen academics - Dr Iain Beavan, Professor Peter Davidson and Professor Jane Stevenson - and is available in the Print Shop on the ground floor of the library.

University library shortlisted for major architectural award

The Sir Duncan Rice Library is one of 25 projects to make it to the finals of The Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS) 2013 Awards.

The ambitious project continues to receive generous support from alumni and private donors around the world, from companies in many sectors of business, and from charitable trusts both local and national, including FAUL.

Chris Banks, University Librarian, said: “The building has been a magnet for researchers, students and the public since we first opened the doors late in 2011. It has enabled us to showcase some of the University’s finest treasures and to attract visitors from around the world to see the state of the art facility and the unique collections it now holds. It has inspired art and creativity and, above all, it is a wonderfully inspiring building in which to work.”
Slippers belonging to Napoleon Bonaparte’s sister unearthed in Aberdeen

A pair of tiny silk and leather slippers have lain unnoticed in the vast collections of the University of Aberdeen for more than 140 years.

Thanks to the detective work of a curatorial assistant it has been discovered that the embroidered shoes boast a royal connection and once belonged to Napoleon Bonaparte’s sister, Princess Pauline Borghese.

Their colourful history was unearthed by Louise Wilkie, who joined the museum team last June and was working on one of her first major assignments. She was tasked with cleaning and sorting through a collection belonging to the Banff-born medical graduate and extensive traveller Robert Wilson (1787 – 1871).

The decorative shoes, which are equivalent to a UK children’s size two and incredibly narrow, measuring just 40mm across the toes, took Louise’s attention. They were contained within a chest of clothes and were simply marked on the sole ‘Pauline Rome’ so she decided to investigate further.

Louise said: “Robert Wilson left his collection of objects from his extensive travels to the museum in his will in 1871.

“In a list of the objects donated by Wilson is the description of ‘A pair of slippers – Pauline, Rome Jan 20th 1824’. The same inscription is on the base of the slipper.

“I began to look at other archival material held by the University and found that Wilson had a friendship with Princess Pauline Borghese, the sister of Napoleon Bonaparte.

“Letters from him to Pauline show a close friendship and in his diary he describes...
...Slippers belonging to Napoleon Bonaparte’s sister unearthed in Aberdeen

... how she spent a lot of time with him travelling in Italy and gave him many gifts, including a ring which is also held in the museum collections.”

The delicate dimensions of the slippers also fit with descriptions of Princess Pauline, who was said to have been an exquisitely beautiful but very petite woman, who was often carried from room to room.

She was a colourful character - the youngest sister of Napoleon who became Princess Pauline when she married Prince Camillo Borghese in 1803. This marriage was not a happy one, due to Pauline’s infidelity and much of her life was riddled with scandal.

She met Wilson, who graduated in Medicine from Marischal College and served as a ship’s surgeon with the East India Company, in the 1820s.

With wealth secured through profitable trading while in the Company’s service and a driving curiosity, Wilson had become a prolific traveller.

Louise added: “The relationship between Wilson and Princess Pauline can only be speculated upon, however records do indicate some form of attraction and attachment.

“In his diary he wrote ‘I passed a fortnight in the vicinity of Pisa with the Princess Borgese in a state of almost perfect seclusion and afterwards accompanied her to the Baths of Lucca.’

“It seems she spent a great deal of time with him in Italy and a close friendship developed.

“He kept the gifts she had given him for life and then they passed to the University collections.

“It is amazing to think the slippers have been here all this time but their significance was never fully realised. I was delighted to make a discovery of this kind, especially so early into my work in museums.”

Princess Pauline’s slippers and the ring she gifted to Wilson are now on display for the first time in the University of Aberdeen’s King’s Museum as part of a display of ‘100 Curiosities’.

Neil Curtis, Head of Museums at the University of Aberdeen, said: “The University holds huge collections and many of the items given to us over the years do not have full descriptions.

“It was a great piece of detective work from Louise to piece together the fascinating history behind the slippers.

“We are delighted that these significant objects are now on display and can be enjoyed by the public for the first time.”

By Joanne Milne, Communications Team.

FAUL’s 50th celebration

On the 4th of October last year we celebrated FAUL’s ‘golden’ anniversary with a convivial evening for Friends in the Craig Suite of The Sir Duncan Rice Library, where guests enjoyed spectacular panoramic views over the silver city as the sun went down.

On display during the evening was a selection of Special Collections treasures which have been purchased thanks to the generous support of members over the past half-century: the Fraser Cup, symbolising the long
tradition of support for the University by its alumni; a first edition of Dickens’ Great Expectations; a rare corrected proof copy of Redgauntlet: a tale of the 18th century by Sir Walter Scott; a folio facsimile of William Blake watercolours, and many more. There was also a slideshow of more Friends-funded items which was displayed throughout the evening, making use of the excellent screen-projection facilities of the venue.

Professor Ian Diamond warmly welcomed an excellent turn-out of Friends, and thanked the library for its contribution towards creating a student experience which he described as ‘second to none’, having recently received excellent results from a national student satisfaction survey which emphasised our competitive advantages in relation to other Scottish universities.

Next, Graham Hunter, our highly esteemed Chairman, introduced the featured speaker for the evening with customary good grace and wit.

Jack Webster has been President of the Friends of Aberdeen University Library for 11 years, and, as Friends may know from previous talks, he is an award-winning public speaker, noted for his humour and humility. The evening’s talk was titled from Maud to Manhattan, although Graham’s alliterative alternative: From Buchan to Beverly Hills might have had more chance if Jack’s latest book, in addition to the seventeen he has previously had published, had not been due to arrive with its publisher the next day.

Jack’s personal story is an extraordinary one: from early life in rural Aberdeenshire, and humble beginnings at his local paper, his journalism career rocketed him into a galaxy of international stars. His literary beginnings, however, are firmly local, and he acknowledged the influence of renowned author James Leslie Mitchell - better known as Lewis Grassic Gibbon - on his writing style. From working with Grassic Gibbon, Jack learned to use ‘the rhythm of Scots’ in his own writing, and, years later, adapted Grassic Gibbon’s most famous novel Sunset Song as a successful play.

His work with the Daily Express sent Jack around the world - New York, Hong Kong, Singapore and more - to meet legends such as Charlie Chaplain, Sophia Loren, Bob Hope, and Ginger Rogers, to select just a few. Jack picked some personal highlights too: a week as a ghost writer for Mohammed Ali, and an (implicitly innocent) ‘bedroom encounter’ with model and showgirl Christine Keeler, the details of which are best left to the imagination. All in all, as Jack noted, not a bad career for a lad who was dismissed from Gordon’s College at fifteen!

Once again, the Friends would like to extend our sincere gratitude to Jack, and all who helped to make the evening so entertaining and enjoyable. To leave you with same sentiment with which Jack closed his speech: “The past is history. The future is a mystery. Now is a gift, and that’s why they call it the present!”

By Georgia Brooker.
Thanks to you

Contributions from Friends help us to develop our collections to benefit the community and the people of the North of Scotland by

♦ encouraging donations of funds and of books, prints, manuscripts and other items
♦ helping the Library to buy special books, manuscripts and more
♦ encouraging interest in the Library and the potential of its collections

On the expert advice of our Rare Books Librarian Keith O’Sullivan, the Special Collections have acquired a fine example of a rare binding for the Library’s ‘Special Books Local’ (SBL) collection of volumes printed specifically within Aberdeen. Funding of £1,000 from the Friends contributed to half the cost of the book; the remainder being covered by the Special Collections Centre.

The book is by Elizabeth, Marchioness of Stafford (1765-1839), is entitled Views in Orkney and on the north-eastern coast of Scotland taken in MDCCCV and dates from 1807. What distinguishes this item is that it is a fine example of contemporary presentation Aberdeen corner-square binding - on this occasion of dark blue morocco - a high quality leather made of lambskin - on heavy boards, tooled gilt and blind-stamped floral patterned border with gilt thistles, figures of St. Andrew and the coat of arms of the Earl of Essex, to whose library it was presented in 1808.

The Library has a number of bindings of this type. The acquisition of Views in Orkney supports our current collection policy for rare books, which identifies the “purchase of texts bound in 19th century ‘Aberdeen Corner-Square’ style and other (post-1800) locally printed or published works important because of their design features or history of production” as a priority. Further, the SBL Collection is specifically targeted for enhancement through purchase of “texts (printed and MS) bound in the nineteenth-century ‘Aberdeen Corner-Square’ style”.

As with all the Special Collections Centre’s holdings, the book has been fully catalogued, and is now available for use by students, staff and visiting researchers in our Wolfson Reading Room, under supervision. It is anticipated that it will also feature in future exhibition work.
Friends have also assisted in the purchase of an early and extremely rare railway report from the early 19th Century, which has greatly enhanced the Library’s O’Dell Collection of railway-related materials - one of Aberdeen’s major strengths. £500 has been donated by FAUL towards the £950 total cost of the report. No other copy has been traced either by library staff, or by the professional booksellers who offered it for sale, and so it seems highly likely that the document is completely unique.

The item concerned records the proceedings of the General Meeting of the Stockton and Darlington Railway Company, held on 10 July, 1827. It is significant in that it details the progress of the world’s first passenger railway, and in only the second year of its operation.

The following description is from a catalogue supplied by Samuel Gedge, Bookseller.

“[RAILWAYS.] At a general meeting of the Stockton and Darlington Railway Company, held at the George Inn, Yarm, on Tuesday, the 10th day of July, 1827 … Thomas Meynell, Esq. in the chair …

[G.M.Greenwood, Albion Office, Darlington.] [1827.]

The privately-owned railway, opened 27 September 1825, was designed initially to transport coal onto ships at Stockton from surrounding inland mines. Crucially, it also carried passengers. The main promoter Edward Pease (1767-1858), a local Quaker wool merchant, recruited the railway engineer George Stephenson (1781-1848) as principal engineer. Stephenson’s steam locomotive Locomotion No. 1 travelled the full length of the line on the opening day at speeds of between 12 and 16 miles per hour.

This report, containing a review of the progress of the company together with accounts and plans for expansion, strikes an optimistic note: “the Committee … embrace the opportunity of congratulating their fellow proprietors, upon the steadily increasing importance of the concern, which is most satisfactorily demonstrated by the monthly statement of receipts. It must be a cause of satisfaction to those with whom this undertaking originated, to find that it meets with such decided support from the public, and to see those opinions which a few years ago, were by many considered empty and delusive, proved to have had their foundation in clear and enlightened views, of the best means of promoting the interests of commerce, and diffusing general prosperity …”
Gordon Hay has completed a translation of the New Testament into Doric - the first of its kind - and he recently presented this project at one of our King’s Museum Lectures, hosted in collaboration with the Elphinstone Institute.

We’ve made a recording of Gordon reading these extracts so, if you’d like to listen to some local language then go to www.abdn.ac.uk/library/documents/newsletters/HayNTDoric.mp3.

In Doric

Gordon Hay here. A’ve jist published ma translation o e New Testament in Doric. Iss is foo it aa cam aboot an een or twa wee bitties tae lat ye see fit it’s like.

Ilka twa ear, e Buchan Heritage Society his a Doric Service wi e readins, prayers, hymns an sermon, for e maist o’t, in e Doric. In 2006 e committee spiert at ma gin A culd pit twa wee bitties o e Bible intae Doric for them. A did jist att, they gaed doon rael weel an A likit e challenge o deein them. A set oot tae try ma han at some mair bitties an or linth, some fower ear on, A’d deen e hale New Testament. Anither twa ears o sortin it oot an correctin, A hid the hale thing riggit an it wis published in November 2012.

Here’s a wee tastie o fit it’s like:

“Syne he boorded e boatie, an his disciples gaed in efter him. Aa at eence, a muckle storm got up ower e loch, till e waves were brakkin richt ower e heid o e boatie. Bit he wis sleepin. His disciples cam an waakent him sayin, “Lord, save hiz or we’ll seerly perish.” An he says tae them, “Fit are ye feert for? Fit little faith ye hiv.” Syne he reese up, gied e win an e watter a tellin aff an there wis a deid calm. (E Gospel o Mattha 8:23-26)

Fae the Aul Man tae ma gweed frien Gaius, ma aul cronie. Weel, Gaius, foo are ye deein, min, A hope yer keepin weel eneugh an are hale an herty, body an sowl. (E Third Screivin o Jock verses 1-2)

Gin ye wid like tae fin oot mair aboot it ye can get a haud o ma at gordon@doricbible.com.”
In Standard English

My name is Gordon Hay and I have recently published my version of the New Testament in Doric. This is the background as to how it came about and some short samples of the translations.

Every two years The Buchan Heritage Society organises a Doric Service with the readings, prayers, hymns and sermon largely in Doric. In 2006 the committee asked me if I would translate two short Bible passages into Doric for that year’s service. This I did, the passages were well received and I had enjoyed the challenge of carrying out the translations. I started to dabble in some other passages and eventually, four years later, completed the whole New Testament. After two years of revisals and corrections, the work was published in November 2012.

Here are some samples:

“And when he was entered into a ship, his disciples followed him. And behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea, insomuch that the ship was covered with the waves: but he was asleep. And his disciples came to him and awoke him, saying, Lord, save us: we perish. And he saith unto them, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith? Then he arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm.” (Matthew 8:23-26).

“The elder unto the wellbeloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth. Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” (Third letter of John verses 1-2).

For more details or information please contact me at gordon@doricbible.com.
The FAUL committee has recently granted the sum of £2958 for the purchase of a complete set (24 vols) of the New York Edition of The Novels and Tales of Henry James. The purchase of this resource completes the very fine holdings that exist in Aberdeen for the study of James’s work, and enhances the University’s holdings of rare printed materials. Keith O’Sullivan, the Rare Books Librarian, has sourced a complete set of this edition from Adrian Harrington Rare Books in Kensington London.

Between 1907 and 1907, Charles Scribner in New York issued a collected edition of Henry James’s fiction in twenty-four volumes. This was issued in the UK by Macmillan. For this edition James revised all of his novels and short stories and wrote a series of Prefaces exploring the process of their creation. So, this edition, although in some senses a reprint, constitutes a first edition of the revised versions of James’s texts (usually the texts reprinted in paperback form) and of the Prefaces, regarded by many as a key text in the history of literary theory. The series was designed as a deluxe subscription issue, printed on specially watermarked paper and issued with photographic plates by the distinguished photography Alvin Coburn.

These books are therefore an essential primary source for anyone working on James, but are also of interest to those interested in publishing and book production at the turn of the twentieth century.
The Sir Duncan Rice Library already has superb resources for the study of James’s life and work. There are many first volume editions in the Collections, and the library’s Periodical holdings from the era contain many of the serialised versions of James’s texts and contemporary reviews of his work. There is also a strong selection of secondary material relating to James. The only major gap in the resources available in Aberdeen for this topic of study was the lack of a New York Edition. There is an incomplete set at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh, and prior to this acquisition the nearest accessible complete set was at the University of Glasgow.

Henry James is a widely-read canonical author with a lively critical following, and postgraduate students at the University have engaged in a number of recent PhD projects on James. We expect that he will remain a staple of academic interest at Aberdeen for years to come.

James has been the main subject of my own research interests since the mid 1990s. Over the next two to three years, I will be working on The Turn of the Screw and Other Tales, Vol 26 of The Complete Fiction of Henry James to be published by Cambridge University Press in 2016. As the volume editor for this section of the fiction, I will be compiling textual variants and supporting notes for nine pieces of James’s shorter fiction from the 1890s and preparing a critical introduction. Scans of some of the necessary material are available online. However, scans are often not of high enough quality for editing purposes, as punctuation can be lost in the scanning process, making this an inaccurate mode of working. Other kinds of information, such as page numbers, end papers, adverts, book notices and printing information are often not included. For this job, there is no substitute for working with the real text.

Given the long history of expertise within the English programme in literature of this period, the activities of the Centre for the Novel, and the lively postgraduate culture within English, we envisage continued interest in these texts. In July 2014, the Henry James Society will hold its sixth international conference at the University of Aberdeen, bringing together James scholars from around the world. Many of these visitors will be keen to make use of our fine holdings in this area.

By Dr Hazel Hutchison
School of Language and Literature
Sarah Chapman and Lynsey McNab, our Learning and Outreach Officers, interview Collections Care Assistant Laura Castle about her personal pick from the Special Collections.

Tell us about what you do at the Special Collections Centre (SCC)

I’m the Collections Care Assistant for the SCC. That means that I’m a kind of caretaker for the collections. I have a very varied job and I do lots of different tasks during the week. I go out and do surveys of potential collections, to assess what can be brought in to the SCC. I also make sure our stores are kept clean by doing regular deep cleans. This is part of the Integrated Pest Management programme and it ensures that our stores are not an environment where insects or pests would want to come and live. They are the types of things that would damage the collections so we don’t want them here.

My job is mainly preservation rather than conservation. Preservation is making sure that our collection is housed correctly, from the environment in the stores to ensuring that the way the items are stored on the shelves isn’t damaging them. If an archive is in a folder made of acidic paper that can damage the material inside so I’ll change it to a new folder that is acid free. If papers have been held together with a rusty paper-clip I remove it and clean the surface of the document to take away rust stains. I cleaned a whole section of the collection when I was a volunteer many years ago.

Sometimes if an item is damaged I will put it in a melinex sleeve, made of a special kind of plastic. This means that the item is able to be held and used for access without it getting more damaged.

I do a lot of lone working but I also work with the rest the Conservation department. I learn new things everyday from my Conservation colleagues. Brannah, our book conservator, can teach me on one day how to put things in melinex sleeves and show me how to make a custom box for things that can’t go in the sleeves. And then the next day she could be teaching me how to use special kinds of pastes and paper to stick down parts of books which are coming off.

Conservators can repair items which have been damaged, but they are also concerned with the preservation side of things. After all there is no point in fixing something and then shoving it back in the same acidic folder.

As well as taking care of the collection I am also a first aider, a health and safety adviser and a work station assessor. I do a lot of volunteer introductions as well. I’m also a qualified archivist.

What do you like most about your job?

I like the variety of my job. One day I’ll be looking at graphs to monitor the environment in the stores and then the next day I’ll be wrapping up books for treatment.
Tell us about one your favourite items in the collection

I have been delving into the collections since I started volunteering in 2005 or 2006, so I have many favourite items. I have been a little ferret in this place! I’ve worked on plans, glass plate negatives, rare books, letter collections, oral history, basically every type of archive material. Therefore it was very difficult to try and make a short list, never mind choose one favourite item. In the end I have chosen the Lib R Collection as my favourite collection because it reflects my job in its variety.

Lib R is short for the Librarian’s Room. Nowadays the University of Aberdeen has many libraries, including The Sir Duncan Rice Library, but until 1860 the University only had one library, King’s College Library. There was only one librarian and no archivists until the 1970s, so the librarian had to deal with a vast range of both books and archives. Certain books ended up in the librarian’s own special room and this formed the Lib R collection. It is still added to today, although they tend to be modern limited editions and the output of private presses.

From this varied collection, which would you say is your favourite item?

Out of them all I chose a photograph album, Lib R f 779 IND vol 2. It is volume 2 of a collection of photograph albums containing photographs from lots of different people going to different countries including China, East Africa and Canada in the 1900s. This is the India and Ceylon volume and I chose it because I did my undergraduate dissertation on mixed race children in India in relation to the East India Company.

For people of the early 1900s the photographs in the albums showed what life was like in these countries. You can see normal life (although slightly staged for the photographer), different types of buildings, weddings, fashion, festivals and lots more. You can see people from different levels of the caste system, from royalty of India to ethnic minorities. There are people in what look like tribal settings with nose plugs. In a lot of the depictions of normal life the people don’t look that intrigued or distracted by the fact that they’re having their picture taken. And in the album there is a photograph of a Tibetan woman; some of the photographers must have travelled quite far north in India.

Do we know who took the pictures?

There seem to be two main photographers; Skene & Co. and Bourne & Shepherd. However the photographs are so wide spread that I think this could be like modern photograph collections where you’ve got different photographers and they’ll just put their photographs together into one album.

What do you like most about the album?

I like the humanity of it. I like the fact that they’re not ignoring different social groups, you’ve got minstrels so to speak, you’ve got warriors and washermen, but then on the next page you’ve got a market place, and then a modern building that to me looks like it could be in the West Indies.

I blame my dad for my interest in photographs. Both my granddads used to take lots of photographs, and now my dad is midway through digitising 200 of our family photographs!

Do you have a favourite page in the album?

I probably like the photographs of women the most, the ones that are almost like really early fashion shots. I almost did my dissertation on how the East India Company with its big trade routes across India changed British fashion over the years,
Would you stamp it nowadays?

No, we wouldn’t. An interesting thing about the collection is that you can see which period an item came from by what the librarians have done with it, as cataloguing techniques have changed over the years. Some older ones will have little stickers on the outside which make me cringe because the glue can damage the book if the label is peeled off. Some will have the little tags on the top attached with string, and if the string is too thick and too near to the books spine it can damage it. Some will just have the catalogue number written in pencil in the inside cover, while a lot of the ones which are bequests and gifted items have bookplates on them. I’ve seen so many interesting bookplates while cleaning.

Are you more interested in photographs of people than of scenes?

Not really because there’s always somebody in the photographs. If you’re looking at one of the George Washington Wilson photographs online, zoom in and you’ll probably see somebody going about their day-to-day life in the background. They’ll be going to work, or taking their horse to market, or even having a snooze! There’s a great one in the Harbour Board Collection where they’ve taken a picture and there’s somebody quite obviously having a snooze against a lamp post further down.

Thanks Laura, for a fascinating look into the amazing Lib R collection.

Laura’s job lets her see all sorts of amazing things in our Rare Book and Archive collections. If you would like to find out what sort of collections we hold why not take a look at our webpages. And if you are interested in travel photography, illustration and writing then visit our Wanderlust exhibition in the Gallery until 7 September.
The Sir Duncan Rice Library hosted an international conference from May 8-10, entitled 'Medical Knowledge between Polymathy and Disciplinarity: Duncan Liddel (1561-1613) in Context', which was organised and sponsored by the University’s Centre for Early Modern Studies, the Wellcome Trust, the Centre for the History and Philosophy of Science, Technology and Medicine and the Centre for the Study of History, Culture and the Environment.

Duncan Liddel was an Aberdonian mathematician, astronomer and medical doctor who studied in Frankfurt/Oder and Rostock where he had contacts to the famous Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe. He took up a chair in mathematics and medicine at the German University of Helmstedt, near Brunswig, before advancing to pro-rector. He returned to Scotland in 1612 and left his fascinating personal library, including editions of Copernicus and heavily annotated volumes on astronomy, Galenic and Paracelsian medicine, natural philosophy, mathematics and other sciences to Marischal College. Visitors to the conference were invited to view a selection of these works on display from our Special Collections.
A tribute to Emeritus Professor Michael C Meston

It is with great sadness that we share news of the death of Emeritus Professor Michael C Meston, on 8 February 2013, aged 80 years.

Friends’ Chairman Graham Hunter gave the following address at a recent Committee meeting:

“It falls to me to pay tribute to Mike Meston, who has been a member of the Executive Committee since 24 April 1978 - almost 35 years of service to the Friends, doing everything from helping to revise our constitution to stuffing newsletters into their envelopes.

Service was the key word in Mike’s life. He was educated at Gordon’s College where he was outstanding, both academically and athletically. He then graduated with an MA (First Class Honours) from this university in History, followed by an LLB with Distinction. After further distinguished legal study at Chicago University, he returned to the world of legal academia as Professor of Jurisprudence here from 1968-71, and then of Scots Law from 1971-96.

He was an honorary Sheriff of Grampian Highlands and Islands; Vice Principal at Aberdeen University from 1979-82, when there was only one VP role; Trustee of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland; Governor of Robert Gordon’s College; member of the Grampian Health Board; Honorary Executive Director of Aberdeen Royal Infirmary N.H.S. Trust, and a member of the financial board of Christ’s Church College, Aberdeen.

He was THE authority on the Succession (Scot) Act 1964, and author of the definitive textbook on the same subject.

His hobbies included golf, photography, and mending clocks. I love the image that, every Thursday evening, the Professor of Scots Law and the Professor of Practical Theology played snooker together at their club.”

One story from Mike’s university years is recorded in a special interview made for the Quincentennial History Project in 2000 by John Hargreaves, which is contained within the Library’s Oral History Archive, and recounts an undergraduate escapade of the ‘Cloche Boys’: a group of five former students in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Aberdeen in 1953, including Mike.

It is intended to elucidate an inscription on a seat in the King’s College Quadrangle which reads ‘The Cloche Boys November 3 1953 in penance for a dastardly deed’.

They recalled their campanological caper as follows:
Transcription of Interview: [Note: some additions to the transcript have been made by Iain Davidson, and are indicated in italics in square brackets]

“H There are five names attached to that inscription and three of those named are here today. Perhaps I might start by asking them to introduce themselves?
D Iain Davidson.
M Mike Meston.
A Alan Anderson.
H And you were I think all students in the Faculty of Arts in 1953. And two other people were named?
D Yes Johnny Adams who was in History, as Mike and I were, and Gus Howitt, who was in History and Economic History and was about two or possibly three years behind us, I think two, and both of these are dead.
H Thank you very much. Alan, I think perhaps you would like to start by describing the dastardly deed and what actually took place.
A [Reading from written account] It was October 1953, term had not long started.
After a year in Göttingen I was still a bit unsettled and viewing an examless Junior Honours year with little enthusiasm. In this mood I bumped into Iain Davidson and John Adams, both into final year History and both similarly disaffected.
"Let's do something."
Wandered into the Library, saw the bell. "Let's take the bell". I could borrow a cousin's car. We would need a driver, Gus Howitt was recruited. We would need publicity. Mike Meston's father was deputy editor of the Press & Journal. Mike was recruited.
The plan evolved simply. On Tuesday 3rd November, I attended the German Club in the Union. This finished about 9 p.m., giving me time to drive to King's and park out front, where Gus collected the car. I went into the Library and met Iain and Addie. (I expect all five of us had a last minute huddle before splitting up, but I don't recall.) We climbed the stairs to the left of the entrance going up to the gallery. About half way up there was (is?) a window giving on to the roof. Addie and I went out on to the roof and Iain bolted the window behind us. Shortly afterwards the bell was rung for the closure of the Library, normally about 9.30/9.40 as I recall. Iain hid behind the bookstacks [upstairs] in the History/English? [Modern Languages] bay until the Library had been vacated and checked by the night watchman. He then let us in off the roof and we went down to collect the bell which stood half way along the floor of the Library to the left side. We muffled the clapper and Addie and I picked it up and followed Iain.
H How heavy was the bell? Was it a one man load?
A It wasn't terribly heavy but it was awkward. It was a bell hanging on a wooden frame needing two of us.
M It needed to be muffled.
A It was about 5 feet by about 2 to 3 feet wide - the frame was. [Resumes reading from written account] It was of course dark, and while Addie and I could see well enough, Iain couldn't and kept bumping into things, "Bloody Hell Davidson!". The plan was to come down into the foyer of the Library and leave by Dr Simpson's office on the right as you go out (now cloakroom and lavatories). We did this as far as the external door giving on to Cromwell Tower. Mike was outside the door keeping watch on the Sacrist's office where the night man sat. Given the all-clear by him, we came out into the Tower, out into the Quad, quickly round the corner, down to the playing fields. We crossed the corner of the field to the wall alongside Regent Walk behind which Gus was parked. The bell was over the wall and into the car with Gus, Iain, Addie and myself and away! - Mike astride his motorbike.
The meeting with the P&J took place, not at the junction of the Ring Road and Great Northern Road, somewhere (across the Don?) [in an old quarry] more quiet and secure*. Afterwards we drove to Iain's home and put the bell in his parents' coal cellar. Next day Iain's mother [sister] opened her P&J: "What's Iain and Alan's photograph doing in the paper? Oh goodness me!"

Meanwhile beneath her feet …

The Librarian, Dr Simpson's immediate reaction was to close the Library in the evenings. This upset the many students who used the Library as a workplace of an evening. [Nevertheless, the vast majority found the prank amusing] I don't recall how long we had planned to keep the bell, if indeed we had thought that far, but, quickly to alleviate the inconvenience to fellow undergraduates and with the help of a complaisant taxi driver we returned the bell on Friday afternoon. End of story.

H A very well planned operation. The thought occurred to me, had you been reading accounts of the Stone of Scone?

M No, not at that stage, I had no recollection that that had anything to do with it. We did discover that there was a route out using yale locks on the inside, that didn't involve any difficulty of keys. It went into what was the old lending part of the Library and then from there there was another door out into the corridor in Cromwell Tower. The Cromwell Tower door also had a yale key. I, in fact, was inside upstairs in the bay to let people out and I actually flashed a signal to Gus on the outside. I recall flashing a signal that all was now clear inside.

D My recollection is: I was upstairs and I got a signal from Mike who was under the Pavilion door and he flashed and then I went and let them in. That's my recollection.

M Shall we say the unreliability of evidence.

D You're familiar with that? [said ironically]

M Yes, I am quite reasonably familiar with it in Court.

A Presumably you'd come through from the Pavilion round the front of the Library?

M Yes, I must have done that. I don't really recollect, but I certainly was at the door of the Cromwell Tower. It was my function to shut it, it wouldn't have done if burglars had got in. I had to make sure it was shut, but obviously with the Sacrist in his box on the other side I had to leave that for some time because I had to bang it three times to get it closed, eventually having given people a chance to make off. Nonetheless there was no reaction at all to the door being hammered shut.

H The Sacrist did maintain a night watchman patrol in those days?

M They were in the box. They did a patrol and once they'd cleared, [they went into the box] you now just under the archway coming in. The most startling thing that I had was the following morning, it was rather different from your problem with mother [Iain's sister] spotting your photograph, was being seized by one of the Library attendants the next morning and thought I had been rumbled already. But he proceeded to tell me how the bell had been taken out and he was entirely wrong and I couldn't very well tell him. He indicated that we had got the key out of Dr Simpson's desk and his room was half way down the Library, well we didn't know it was there, but nonetheless it didn't explain how therefore we got it back again and left the door locked. He was totally wrong as to how it had been done but I didn't feel able to enlighten him.

D The reason we decided to take the bell was because the very sour old man who used to be on night watch, I think he had been trained by Heinrich Himmler, and he used to come round at night and ring it and
that was the end, it was actually closer to 9.50.

A 10 O'clock closing time
D And it made an awful noise because by then you were really going hard the last few minutes. It made a terrific noise and I think he took some pleasure out of this. It was a way of getting back at him. The other thing is perhaps Alan you could mention why we were called the Cloche Boys.
A Well this was my French/German connection. Cloche being French for bell, very smart. But also there were then a lot of the gangs in Glasgow were known as the Cosh Boys.

M I'd forgotten that.
H And this was the name you used to the P&J?
M Yes. The fact that my father happened to be deputy editor of the P&J at the time and happened to speak to a photographer who happened to turn up somewhere near Persley, I think in a lay-by, he just happened to be passing by at the appropriate time.
H Yes, another happy coincidence.
D We were very lucky with the weather, it was a fresh November night, windy, no rain, nothing like that. When Alan and Johnny Adams went out on the roof, clad in coat and hat and so on, you really weren't very cold, so that was in our favour. I don't know what we would have done if it had been raining.
A Got wet

H When did your identity become known?
A It didn't - until we wanted it to
M We eventually decided that it would be no bad thing to mark the occasion by donating a bench in the Quad and the original plaque simply had initials on it and for some reason a new plaque was needed, I forget why.
D The date.
M Ah, the date was wrong.
A The year was wrong.
M Yes. Then we put the full names on but that was the first time it emerged.
H And that was when, the original bench?
A The Quincentenary year
M It's as recent as that.
D The new plaque is only some months old because Alan looked into that.
M The opportunity was to donate a bench for the Quincentenary and that was when we did it.
H Well, it was a highly professional operation. I hope you have no others to that you are considering. Last question I suppose. Do you think you served the cause of reducing student apathy in the short term or in the long term?
D Short term.
M Very short, yes.
A A couple of days.
D It was great fun.
A It brightened our lives.
D To carry a secret around. I told Jonathan Daube, after I left University, and I told Denis Rice, long after I left University, and then I don't suppose I discussed it with anybody for 30 years. In fact an old friend of ours who was at Gordon's with us, Bruce Ingram, we mentioned it to him two months ago and he hadn't known, so this is nearly half a century.
H The perfect crime. Well, thank you all very much indeed.”

The full interview transcript is available via LSC&M’s online catalogue at MS 3620/1/108.

The Aberdeen University Oral History Archive is the only one of its kind in the UK. Begun in 1985 as part of the Aberdeen University Quincentenary Project, the interviews were originally intended to aid historians working on monographs commemorating the University’s Quincentenary a decade later. Interviewing continues, however, and the archive now contains over 200 interviews with 170 individuals connected with the University, including past students, long serving members of staff and eminent individuals connected with the University (Principals, senior professors, writers etc.)
AGM and talk
The literature of travel and exploration:
the work of the Hakluyt Society

The Friends Annual General Meeting will be held on Thursday 30 May 2013 at 7pm in the Special Collections Seminar Room (Lower Ground Floor of the Sir Duncan Rice Library). Further details are on the flyers posted to members with this edition.

The AGM will be followed at 7:30pm by a presentation by Roy Bridges. The Library has a full set of 362 volumes published by the Hakluyt Society since its foundation in 1846, some of which will be on display. Roy Bridges will explain the Society’s link with its eponymous Elizabethan forbear and the odd circumstances surrounding its beginnings. Later developments as well as some current problems will also be described. Roy Bridges is Emeritus Professor of History in the University and has published extensively on the history of exploration, especially in Africa. A member of the Hakluyt Society since 1964, he was its President from 2004 to 2010.

Wanderlust exhibition

The latest exhibition at the Gallery of the Sir Duncan Rice Library features vivid writing contained in some of the travel journals and explorers’ notebooks held with the University’s Special Collections. Wanderlust describes a yearning for distant places; an irrepressible compulsion to discover the unknown. Spanning four centuries, these writings give evidence of that compulsion to go beyond the horizon, opening an intimate window into lost worlds. Wanderlust is open to visitors until 7 September 2013.

www.abdn.ac.uk/library/about/friends-of-the-library/