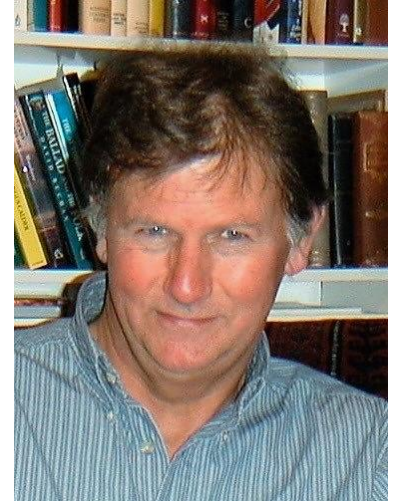


Interviewees: Alasdair Macrae [left] and Rory Watson (Prof) [right]
UoS Dates: AM: 1969 - 2002;
RM: 1971 - 2009
Role(s): AM: Lecturer, latterly Senior Lecturer, Dept of English Studies
RM: Lecturer, latterly Professor, Dept of English Studies and Founding Director of the Stirling Centre for Scottish Studies. Emeritus Professor



Interview summary:

Start 01:05 – AM came to Stirling in 1969 to the English Studies Department after five years of teaching in Khartoum. Head of Department later said he wanted people who had taught outside Britain.

02:46 – RW came in 1971 to English Studies. Wanted to come to Stirling as he had heard about the semester system and new system for assessment. Was finishing his PhD in Edinburgh and wrote to Tommy Dunn asking about vacancies. There were none at the time, but after a second year in Edinburgh Tommy Dunn wrote to say a post was to be advertised. RW was appointed and never regretted it.

05:0 – GS came in 1970, was visiting the campus and saw that David Buchan whom he knew from Aberdeen University was working here. Wrote to him to ask about the Department and then wrote to Tommy Dunn and was appointed. For the first time he was asked by the Head of Department what he would like to teach, rather than being told what he had to teach.

07:01 – When GS was appointed in 1970 so was Norman MacCaig. Norman MacCaig had been a primary school teacher and retired at 60. Was invited to be a Reader in Modern Poetry at Stirling. A major Scottish poet.

08:40 – Tommy Dunn and Tom Cottrell were very involved in Scottish culture. Norman MacCaig had been a writer in residence in Edinburgh but Tommy Dunn liked the idea of having him be a lecturer. He was later promoted to Reader. Stirling as a new university appointing someone without a degree or PhD in English as a lecturer in English was very unusual. Students were appreciative of the intimate involvement with Norman MacCaig. He often invited friends to come and speak, so the Department got used to writers being a part of the teaching. Norman MacCaig liked to teach East European poetry and was a lively member of the Department.

13:30 – RW did work with Hugh MacDiarmid and invited him along to do readings. A feeling that universities should be cultural places, Stirling had a policy of art buying which has kept up. Staff often took part in the dramatic society. Now there is no time for that kind of engagement in the cultural life of the university. The early student intake had a lot of mature students with minimal formal requirements, including a lot of older ladies. Mature students were some of the best students GS ever taught. It was an unusual mix in the first ten years.

16:41 – AM remembers that staff who had taught elsewhere were shocked that there was no staff club. Clubs were open to both staff and students. Teaching had a strong emphasis away from big lectures on small group teaching. Courses could be changed and lecturers could put on courses of their choosing.

19:30 – RW did his PhD on Hugh MacDiarmid, the first person to do so. His supervisor at Cambridge was John Holloway but supervision was basically non-existent then. Helena Shire was helpful to RW. Poetry class had a policy of setting one

newly released book of poetry every year and asking the poet to come and talk about it. Felt any department studying literature should pay attention to contemporary literature.
22:39 – Recently there has been an explosion in creative writing courses across Scotland, Stirling was ahead of the game with this.
23:16 – Newly published volumes were a challenge for students and staff, they were in it together, which was revealing and educational
24:53 – Small group teaching worked well. 8-10 people would be hunched over a poem. Emphasis on close reading. Drama course tried to introduce a wide spread of drama from Classical Greek plays to TV scripts. Regular theatre trips where the discussion would happen naturally on the bus or during the interval, not just in the seminar room. Drama course would also have practitioners visit such as Brian Cox and Giles Havergal.
28:12 – Students had lots of exposure to actual writers. Department was blessed in having several members of staff who wrote their own poems. Department expanded with A N Jeffares from Leeds who gave a wider scope as he was experienced in Commonwealth literature. American literature was never a strength of the department. Writers who visited the University included: Iris Murdoch and Les Murray, whom Angela Smith invited after he spent time at Edinburgh University. Built a good relationship with him.
31:01 – Some students went on to become successful writers such as Jackie Kay and Iain Banks. The openness to experiencing literature together in the classroom encouraged students. At that time there were no formal creative writing classes, those came later. RW and Martin Gray ran an informal creative writing evening class. Angela Smith put Jackie Kay's novel <i>Trumpet</i> on a reading list. She would come and speak to students, telling them 'If you want to be a writer, you must be a reader'. Stirling had an environment that encouraged creative writers. Students were very passionate, AM remembers students fighting over their opinions on poetry.
37:11 – AM, RW and Martin Gray taught an MLitt in Modern Poetry, a one year course assessed by essays instead of exams and with a dissertation at the end. Small groups of 3-8, it was very intense. Students could propose topics for study. It was challenging for staff and students but very enjoyable. Poets came to speak with great regularity. They would stay the night and enjoy a meal with AM and MG. Stirling got a reputation for being hospitable. Tony Harrison, Peter Redgrove, Penelope Shuttle, Dannie Abse and Seamus Heaney were amongst the poets who visited.
44:0 – AM started SCOPE, Stirling Centre for Poetry. Poets would come for an evening and give a public lecture. RW took over SCOPE when AM retired. Organised with help from Glennis Byron. Organised poetry conferences, five in total. Very popular conferences with visitors from across the world. Between 150-180 people attended the first one. Lack of support and participation from other Scottish universities. Such a lack of Scottish participants that AM had to arrange for Douglas Mack to speak with foreign Burns scholars. Edna Longley thought it strange there weren't more sessions on Scottish poetry; Douglas Dunn thought was fine. It was policy to have poets there. Sorley MacLean, R S Thomas, Norman MacCaig and Sharon Olds were attendees. Conferences on poetry were rare. When SCOPE was set up the initial patrons were Les Murray, Sorley MacLean and Seamus Heaney. It worked because AM, RW and MG knew and were friends with poets. Martin Gray wanted Stirling to be hospitable and set a good example.
53:01 – Stirling was unusual in that final year students worked solely on their dissertation in their final semester and it was examined by an external examiner. Number of students choosing to write a dissertation on poetry declined over time. Participation in poetry events also declined. The University was known for its involvement in poetry. Foreign students were amazed that they were studying at a place where living writers visited.
57:02 – From the beginning, Tom Cottrell and Tommy Dunn allowed students to submit a creative piece for their dissertation. This wasn't commonly done at the beginning but became very popular. From the beginning it was decided there should be a place for student's own creative work.
[Ends 58:05]

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