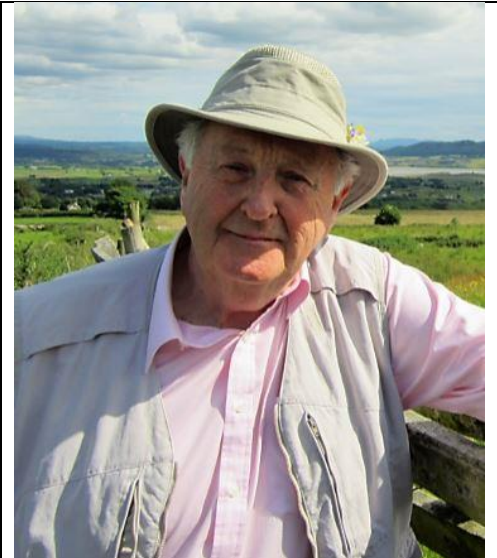


Interviewee: Michael Alexander (Professor M J Alexander)  
UoS Dates: 1969 - 1985  
Role(s): Lecturer, latterly Reader in English Studies



## Interview summary:

### *Summary of content; with time (min:secs)*

**Start 01:07** – MA had an unorthodox route into teaching at Stirling. Had a very literary education. Poet Peter Wickham, who was a friend of Ezra Pound, taught at his prep school and introduced the boys to Dickens at an early age. He went on to Downside which had high expectations of its pupils, with very good English teachers such as Robin Ashill, Father Sebastian Moore, John Coulson and Father Hilary Stewart, whose work had been supervised by F R Leavis. MA was interviewed for a scholarship at Cambridge twice but was rejected. Interviewed by W.W. Robson at Oxford; MA got a place at Trinity College. Trinity didn't have an English don; the previous one Reginald Tiddy had died in the war. MA was mostly taught by Dennis Burden. Oxford was intellectually disappointing as there was no discussion but MA enjoyed all the reading. Christopher Butler and Katherine Duncan-Jones were contemporaries.

**17:30** – Commissioned by Peter Wickham to translate medieval poetry and was paid £100 in 1959. The publisher then folded. Anthony White was a friend of MA and his father was the director of the board of the Arts Council. Also on the board was a man called Williams who also worked at Penguin and suggested MA send the book to them. Penguin published the book.

**19:00** – Never considered being an academic, instead wanted to be a writer. Didn't know what to do after university. Wasn't offered any postgraduate study. Got a job at William Collins the publishers but MA's father suggested he learn French and Italian. Deferred the job at William Collins for a year to teach English in France and to learn Italian in Perugia. Also did some translation while away. Met Martin Gray in Italy and became friends. Returned and started work as an editorial trainee at Collins. Lyn and Hubert Gutteridge were the authors of the first book MA edited.

**26:00** – After completing his book of translations and traineeship at Collins, MA decided to try his hand at academia. Went to Princeton in the United States of America for postgraduate study. Wanted to see more of America before returning to Britain and so applied for jobs at summer schools. Was offered a full time job at the University of New York, Buffalo. This encouraged MA to apply elsewhere and he ended up at the University of California Santa Barbara where Peter Wickham and Basil Bunting also were. In the end found it boring and returned to publishing in the UK at Andre Deutsch. This left no time for reading or writing.

**30:43** – Penguin asked MA to translate *Beowulf*. Would work half the day at Andre Deutsch and the other half translating at the British Museum.

**31:41** – Wanted to get back in to academia and so began applying for PhD places. Accepted to numerous universities in

<p>London, Oxford and Cambridge but struggled to find a grant to fund it. Considered becoming a school teacher and getting his degree part time. A publishing friend heard of a vacancy for a medievalist at the University of East Anglia and MA was appointed. Later Alastair Wood informed MA of a vacancy at the University of Stirling. Alastair Wood had been at Santa Barbara with MA and had just got to Stirling. John Conaghan had been appointed.</p>
<p><b>33:48</b> – Had a token interview with Tommy Dunn and Professor Frank Bradbury in July 1969. Tommy Dunn had a plan for the department. It was to be a modern department rather than offering a traditional historical degree. Tommy Dunn wanted staff who had taught abroad, weren't religious maniacs and weren't teetotal.</p>
<p><b>36:41</b> – Had only been to Scotland once previously and knew nothing about it. Terrible problems with housing and MA found it difficult to find somewhere to stay. Local people with spare accommodation didn't think to rent to students or young academics as they didn't know what to expect. Remembers being impressed by the building and by the view from the Pathfoot coffee lounge.</p>
<p><b>38:46</b> – Had to share a room in Pathfoot with three others as there weren't enough rooms. MA shared with Alasdair Macrae and Felicity Riddy. Learned a lot from them and they built a close friendship. By the time Robin Sowerby joined the department everyone had their own room. He was open to impressions.</p>
<p><b>39:38</b> – Took the job offered at Stirling immediately. Santa Barbara offered a job, and hadn't wanted MA to leave in the first place, but MA wanted to stay in Britain.</p>
<p><b>42:03</b> – Tommy Dunn didn't put any pressure on MA to get his PhD quickly. MA's book translating medieval poetry was attractive to Tommy Dunn as it was popularizing and TD wanted a modern English department just as the history department focused on modern history. However Tommy Dunn wasn't a prisoner to this theory and hired those he found interesting, such as Felicity Riddy who was a mediaevalist. Later he appointed more orthodox people such as Robin Sowerby and Ian McGowan. Some people have been critical of Tommy Dunn as he could be lazy but his semester system was clever and he appointed interesting people. He allowed you to do what you wanted which was liberating and many people benefitted from it. Bob Rehder didn't even have an English degree and MA didn't have a research degree but they were still appointed. This wouldn't happen now. There was an inspired amateurism about the teaching; students got their money's worth then. Staff were keen on marking and correcting essays, helping the students to learn to write.</p>
<p><b>46:41</b> – Morale in the department was very high, with a happy atmosphere. Almost nothing wrong with it.</p>
<p><b>47:54</b> – Semester dissertation was good for good students but could be very tough. Difficulty in getting students to choose profitable topics and ensuring everyone got adequate supervision. Remembers supervising Jenny Brown, who became a literary agent, on a dissertation about which Thomas Hardy poems were selected for collections. Dissertations were good experience whether you did well or not and everyone learned a lot from them.</p>
<p><b>49:55</b> – Many colleagues maintained a low opinion of Tommy Dunn, especially Derry Jeffares. Derry Jeffares was an important figure in the early days and had a lot of contacts. Staff had the opportunity to write York Notes which was good experience for those who had never written a book before such as Ian Milligan. Would never have had Quentin Bell or Geoffrey Hill if not for Derry Jeffares. Derry Jeffares was an alarming head of department when he briefly took over from Tommy Dunn. John Riddy later said they were living in a fool's paradise at Stirling; MA thinks he meant that, though the publishing record was high, much of it was not based on academically probing research. People were very happy.</p>
<p><b>53:24</b> – Taught Anglo-Saxon culture and old English as options. A disadvantage of the semester system is there are no pre-requisites which can only work if the core courses are good. MA used lots of translations. Could teach anything as long as you did your share in core courses. Now academics have to specialise very early as research is the priority. Derry Jeffares would deliberately make people teach courses they weren't expert in. There were some cracks that appeared; people like David Buchan only wanted to teach their specialism and not take their share of other courses. People outside the department such as Monica Clough and Arthur Cooper had a very high opinion of David Buchan's book. MA was a teacher who wrote books rather than an academic researcher who had to teach.</p>
<p><b>58:21</b> – Not very thrown by the Queen's visit. The disturbance was predicted by Jean-Pierre Lehmann but it was expected that the Queen's people would deal with it which they didn't. MA held a class at home that day in order to try and get some students off campus. Saw a letter to the university which withdrew funding after the visit. John Riddy saw what a disaster it was. It hit Tom Cottrell and Tommy Dunn very hard.</p>
<p><b>1:00:33</b> – Tommy Dunn assumed he would appoint men. Appointed Felicity Riddy by accident as she was already there. Angela Smith was the second woman in the department. Difficult as they had the burden of female students coming to them with problems both academic and personal.</p>
<p><b>1:02:24</b> – Difficult to find a flat and ended up living in a castle. Miss Marjoribanks, the accommodation officer, would send him to view flats. Lived in some horrible places. Not a huge choice of accommodation for single people. John McCracken and Alastair Wood had bought flats. Eventually rented Kilbryde Castle with Lorn McIntyre. Met John Riddy, Robin Mayhead and Lorn McIntyre on his first day in the Pathfoot coffee lounge. The castle was owned by Sir Colin</p>

Campbell and was rented out by his brother Alistair Campbell. Had ten bedrooms which were filled by a revolving door of people, nearly all single people apart from one couple, the Harrises. Had good parties there.

**1:09:58** – Meeting Eileen, MA's wife. Apart from Alastair Wood and Robin Mayhead most people in the department were married. Eileen McCall was the daughter of a mature student. Some of the very best early students were female mature students. Eileen came to do her PhD at Stirling and they married two years later. MA was offered a job at Bristol but turned it down.

**1:12:27** – Even people who were sceptical by nature such as Martin Gray and Alistair Macrae thought the university was special. It was good to be allowed to do the things you were interested in. MA remembers attending one of Norman MacCaig's lectures.

**1:15:38** – Some people came to Stirling as it was a new and innovative university. MA took the job as he wanted an academic job but came to appreciate those parts of the university very much. The department had both differing and common interests, generally committed to close reading. There were specialisations but that wasn't enough for Alastair Niven or David Buchan.

**1:17:43** – When MA was offered a chair at St Andrews Felicity Riddy and Martin Gray asked Tommy Dunn to make him a professor but MA preferred to go. Derry Jeffares was cross that Tommy Dunn wouldn't offer MA a chair. Donald Low was a bit put out when MA got his chair at St Andrews as he had thought he might get it. Tommy Dunn could be accused of holding the reins too tight and his negativity grew. The department rebelled and wanted a rotating headship. This is what caused him to decide to leave. It wasn't much better afterwards; some replacements such as David Punter were interesting and distinguished but not better heads.

**1:21:16** – There was a good balance of priorities then. Universities weren't under the research pressure that they are now. Tommy Dunn and the other professors had great opportunities. Other Robbins universities had more tensions and fallings out than Stirling. It was pretty heavenly.

**[Ends 1:23:50]**

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