
In 1995 the University of Aberdeen celebrated its quincentennial. As part of the celebrations it commissioned a series which examined the history of the University (formed by the 1860 merger of King’s College, founded in 1495, and Marischal College, founded in 1593). Two earlier volumes examined student life from 1860, and women at Aberdeen; this new volume takes the story of male students (women were not admitted until after 1860) back to the early years of the two universities.

Colin McLaren has produced an illuminating glimpse into student life. It is often difficult to get beyond dry statistics when examining the lives of early university students, but by using a combination of university archival materials, lecture notes, college accounts, family papers, letters and memoirs, and government commissions, he has given life to at least a small number of the 15,000 students who attended King’s and Marischal Colleges in these two and a half centuries. The book is arranged chronologically, covering four periods: 1600-1639, 1640-1717, 1718-1825, and 1826-60. Each chapter begins with a brief description of one student entering King’s and another student entering Marischal. This is an effective device which brings the reader closer to the students of those days.

Much of the information for the earliest period comes from the foundation charters, the New Foundation of King’s and the Foundation Charter of Marischal, which show how the college
authorities thought their students ought to behave. As each chapter shows (and indeed as university teachers over the ages have been acutely aware), how students actually behaved did not always meet this ideal. Throughout the period, there tended to be a double standard in discipline, with those who attended university with the financial support of bursaries held to stricter account than those whose families paid their way. Students came from a fairly broad cross-section of society, including the aristocracy, the professions, the mercantile and craft classes. Early recruitment was largely from the north-east, although as travel became easier, increasing numbers of students came from the Highlands.

The book also traces changes in the curriculum and teaching methods over time. Memorization of a daily lecture was a major task for early students who thus created their own textbooks; later students were encouraged to supplement lectures with additional readings. The ten-month teaching term common in the seventeenth century grew shorter and shorter in later centuries, reaching a minimum of five months in the later eighteenth century. Different branches of knowledge were emphasized in different periods. In the early days, Latin and Greek were crucial as texts were taught in their original language, and students were expected to converse in Latin. By the later eighteenth century, many classes were taught in English. The early emphasis on rhetoric and eloquence, encouraged by the practice of weekly declamations, and especially valuable for those whose future careers lay in the church, education or public life, later gave way to such subjects as philosophy, natural science and medicine.

The ages of entering students varied considerably. Some were as young as ten in the early period, although most were at least twelve. By the later nineteenth century, the average age was sixteen or seventeen. However, at least one student at King’s in the early nineteenth century was forty-three. By modern standards, the number of students was small – in the seventeenth century about twenty new students entered each of the colleges each year. Even at its highest period of recruitment, the entering number of students rarely exceeded seventy. Following a common curriculum, and living in residence together or sharing lodging houses, the students bonded closely. In the later period, they sought more of a say in university affairs through choosing a rector. In the nineteenth century, many of them formed under-
graduate societies. Alongside the more typical debating and literary societies, was King’s Hilaric Cachinary Society, founded in 1848 whose aim was “to encourage mirth and jollity” – it was short-lived.

Some aspects of university life seem to have changed little over the centuries. Both colleges often found themselves short of money and unable to repair decaying buildings before they became ruinous. Student poverty was a constant problem, and both colleges worked hard to increase the number of bursaries available for promising but impecunious boys. Relations between town and gown were not always harmonious; students at Marischal around 1600 had to swear they would not carry weapons into town. Students became caught up in the larger political and religious disputes of their day, including Jacobitism in 1715, and the nineteenth-century debates which split the church.

These centuries also witnessed a fair degree of rivalry between Marsichal and King’s, with each charging the other with enticing away their students. The first recorded ‘riot’ between the two student bodies occurred in 1659, although there may have been earlier incidents. The colleges were joined briefly in 1641, but for most of the period they resisted any attempts at merger, despite the recommendation of three separate commissions during the nineteenth century. The last commission in 1857 finally led to union in 1860. This book, however, performs an admirable service in commemorating both colleges’ long independent existences.

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