

AMY PLENDER SERVING GRENFELL



Alumna Amy Plender (MA Hons 2015, MTh 2017) is a civil servant who works on the UK Government's response to the Grenfell Tower fire.

"I chose Edinburgh before I chose a subject. I wanted to be in a big, exciting city that had a life beyond the university. My first plan was to study English Literature. I did a gap year in Haiti after the earthquake in 2010, which made me think about my faith in a new way. I hadn't done Religious Studies since GCSE, but I applied for theology in Edinburgh and got in. I arrived wondering if I might

still transfer into English, but people at New College were so lovely and I loved its sense of community. By the end of first year I saw that everything I loved about English Lit was also there in Divinity: telling stories, exploring nuances of language and understanding, connecting with people through old and modern texts. I took an outside course in Scottish Literature in first year, but from then on, all my courses were in Divinity.



“I stayed on for the MTh because I felt I had more to learn. Religious literacy is important to me—especially in helping people who don’t have a faith understand what it’s like for people who do. My postgraduate research was on suffering, trauma, and lament. After that, I applied for an internship in London with the think tank Theos. It was a communications and research post, so my theological background meant I got opportunities to write on social issues, and to speak on Radio 4’s Sunday programme. That six-month internship then became a job.

“The Grenfell Tower fire had happened while I was a student. Through my background in lament and inter-faith dialogue, I’d been interested in how faith groups had responded, and was asked by Theos to write about it. My religious literacy and trauma-informed background helped me approach those issues.

“I moved on from Theos to work for Eido Research, providing management consultancy for churches and faith groups, but eventually I applied for a civil service position working with Grenfell.

“My background in theology informs my civil service work profoundly. In a typical week I engage with government ministers and bereaved parents. My work always has many facets and means thinking through difficult problems. Theology trains you for that kind of real life complexity. It pushes you towards nuance, humanness and meaning.”

New School Promotional Films



This year the School is working hard to boost recruitment so, we commissioned two new promotional videos, an undergraduate and postgraduate one. The aim of our undergraduate film was to present the subject and the school in a new light and to also focus on some of the things that really appeal to undergraduates such as; community, diversity of programme's and our building.

For the postgraduate film we wanted to appeal to a diverse group of students, such as those with families, highlighting the different paths you can take with your studies. We also wanted to emphasise how great our academic staff are and the support they offer.

Click on the images to watch the results below.



Undergraduate film



Postgraduate film

You can also see the individual interviews from the postgraduate film here

[Postgraduate Playlist](#)

New Courses on Old Languages Syriac and Sanskrit



This year, New College launched new courses on two ancient languages with great significance to religious traditions across the world: Syriac and Sanskrit.



Dr Salam Rassi, Lecturer in Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations: “Syriac opens up some of the most ancient translations of the Bible, the earliest Christian poetry, and the history of Christian-Muslim interactions. Only a handful of institutions in the world offer training in it. It’s exciting to see Edinburgh emerge as a new location where students can study one of the most important languages in the ancient world.”

Sanskrit is taught by Dr Upali Sraman, the School of Divinity’s first Lecturer in Buddhist Languages. “The School of Divinity’s commitment to offering Sanskrit and other ancient languages fosters a diverse and inclusive learning environment, preserving important linguistic traditions. Teaching Sanskrit is a joy because it opens the door to a fascinating tapestry of South Asian literary, cultural, religious, philosophical, and scientific achievements. The enthusiasm and diligence of my students inspire me to step into the classroom eagerly each day.”



Esther Mombo becomes Honorary Doctorate





Esther Mombo holding her Doctorate

In 1994, the Kenyan theologian Esther Mombo arrived in Edinburgh to begin a PhD at the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World (now the Centre for the Study of World Christianity). Three decades later, she returned to her alma mater to give the 2023 Cunningham Lecture and to receive an honorary doctorate in recognition of her many contributions to theology - and in particular, to the place of women in African theology.

“I was brought up as a Quaker, south of Lake Victoria. My grandmother was my first theological educator. She taught me about equality, stewardship and peace. When I applied to study in Edinburgh, I was teaching at a Bible school in a patriarchal space. I wanted to enlarge my vision, to support women who do ministry and to write about African theology. Through the support of friends, I got a Commonwealth grant that was given through the Church Mission Society, and came to Edinburgh.

“I started with a theological focus but shifted to history, working on African women in the Quaker tradition. I sat in seminars at New College and also in the Centre for African studies: development, theology, and history. Edinburgh was a free space. I got to know students from Korea, Germany, Scotland, Ireland, lay and ordained, men and women, young and old. It was a joy to be able to study within that kind of community.

“The Centre was small and cozy. You knew everybody who was associated with it. I got to know people personally, and their projects, and even their families and

church traditions. I felt I could grow academically and socially. I've kept in touch with friends from those years. I've taught in South Korea, and have good friends in Nigeria and France. Scottish friends took me to ceilidh dances.

"In my time, everyone worked in the computer lab. We journeyed and laughed with each other there. It was a space to vent, which is good for a PhD student!

"Edinburgh shaped my international outlook. There was room to think, to envision, to question, to critique, to analyse. Religion has the power to convene and convince. I don't avoid discussing how religion can be positive and negative—we can see that in the ways women have been treated in the Christian tradition. That's why I've worked very hard in opening more space for women to enter into theological space and to grow there."

Esther Mombo is Professor of Church History and Theologies from Women's Perspectives at St Paul's University in Limuru, Kenya.



Esther Mombo with Peter Mathieson and Professor Emma Wild-Wood

Mary of Guise



Visitors to New College will be well familiar with the statue of John Knox that looms large in the quad—a memorial that vividly depicts his dramatic place in Scottish history. The building renovation work of recent years has given us occasion to consider the place of others in that history, and in particular, prominent women whose stories also form the backdrop to our school. Under the

leadership of Prof. Susan Hardman Moore, that reflection led to the celebrated Scottish sculptor Tim Chalk being commissioned to create a bronze plaque of Knox's contemporary, Mary of Guise (1515-1560), for the quad. The mother of Mary, Queen of Scots, her palace on the Mound fell into ruin, before eventually being demolished in 1845, when New College was built.

Chalk, who had previously contributed work to John Knox House, reflects on his new subject: "She was quite a complex person, an astute political operator, with a clear vision of the art of ruling and a strong sense of personal survival. I'm pleased by the juxtaposition of her with Knox because, generally, women's place in history hasn't been recognised. This adds a balance to that."

The Mary of Guise plaque was installed in the entrance to the New College quad in May 2023. We are delighted to see our building adorned by a piece of remarkable sculpture that reminds us of our site's fascinating local history, and that also challenges us to reimagine our community in the present. The New College community is indebted to Tim Chalk for his contribution to our school.



Changing the Prison Service



Our students go on to many different careers. We spoke to Sophie (MA Hons, Theology) about her path from New

College to the prison service.



“My faith was a big factor in studying theology. As a Christian I wanted to study my faith in a context where I’d be challenged by people who thought differently from me.

“I’d never visited Edinburgh before, but as soon as I came here I was sold. When I visited New College it was so friendly. There was a community feel that I hadn’t experienced when visiting other universities.

“I loved the choice to decide what you want your degree to look like. Alongside theology I took outside courses in Mandarin and Criminal Justice. Working in small groups with students from different backgrounds helped me interact with people, and stretched my thinking. The staff were so personable as well.

“In my workplace I need to find points of connection. Relating to people from different backgrounds and creating space for their ideas, and being able to pull out the gold in other people, are all things I developed at New College. I did a year abroad in Sydney, Australia, which was great.

“I’m on a two-year graduate programme called Unlocked Graduates for people who are interested in changing the prison system for the better. I work full-time as a prison officer in a men’s prison in London, and I’m also studying for a Masters in Applied Custodial Leadership.

“At New College, I was inspired by a friend who worked with offenders as they left prison. I wrote my dissertation on John’s Gospel and rehabilitation in English

prisons. After university I took a year out to work in another job, and one of my friends started in a graduate scheme working a women's prison. I then applied, and loved the assessment process.

"The job is hard. You see people at their lowest moments. But the small wins are really worth it. You see violence, but also acts of kindness. Showing care to vulnerable people is my faith in practice. A lot of men explore faith for the first time in prison. I can engage with them on that level as well. Next year I'll be on placement with the Ministry of Justice. Long term, my goal is to make changes so that people have a different life when they leave prison.

"Theology opened so many doors for me. I don't regret it for a second!"

New College News



Latest updates from around the School.



Principal Jack

Prof. Alison Jack has been inducted as Principal of New College, succeeding Prof. David Fergusson. Her installation was presided over by the Moderator of the Presbytery of Sterling, with our own Prof. Susan Hardman Moore serving as preacher.



AHRC Success

Dr Arkotong Longkumer has received a major grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council for a multiple-year project on 'Decolonising the Museum.' This award, in excess of £1 million, will explore items taken from Nagaland and now housed in the Pitts Rivers Museum, in Oxford.



Tutor of the Year

Final year PhD student Stephen Dolan won the Student Teacher of the Year at the 2022 EUSA Teaching Awards. This is the second year in a row in which a New College PhD student has won this award.



Science and Theology

Prof. Mark Harris has been elected president of the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology—one of the longest-running and most distinguished international scholarly societies for the study of the relationship of the natural sciences and theology.



British Academy Fellowship

Dr Anja Klein has been awarded a £100k Mid-Career Fellowship by the British Academy. This award will enable her to work on ‘Theology born from Crisis:

Resilience Discourse in the three Major Prophets.'



Black History

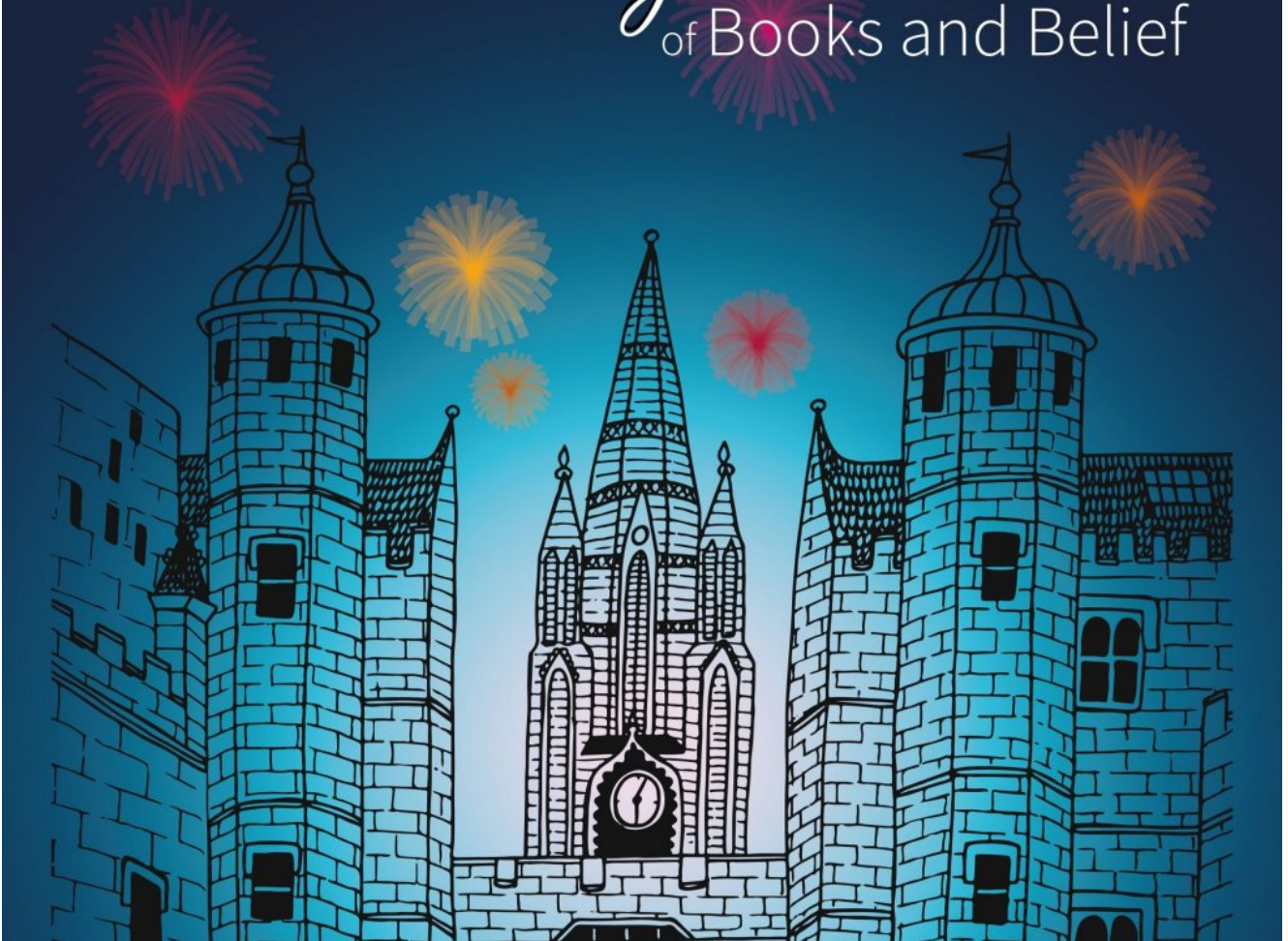
This year's New College Black History Month Lecture was given by Imam Mustafa Briggs, on 'Beyond Bilal: Black History in Islam,' and was jointly sponsored by the School of Divinity, the University of Edinburgh Islamic Society, Race.Ed, and the Edinburgh Race Equality Network.

For more news and events from the School of Divinity visit our main site

[**Divinity News and Events**](#)

New College Festival

New College Festival of Books and Belief



Following their critically acclaimed Winter Tales book festival in 2021, Professors Alison Jack and Jolyon Mitchell welcomed a range of outstanding speakers and writers to the Mound in November 2022 for Books and Belief — a two-day event on the creative range of ways in which writers explore a diverse range of beliefs.

Dr Eric Lewis Williams



New College alumnus Dr Eric Lewis Williams graduated with a PhD in Religious Studies in 2015. Following a first academic appointment at Harvard University, where he was Lecturer in African and African American Studies, his career took a surprising turn when he became Curator of Religion at the Smithsonian.