

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

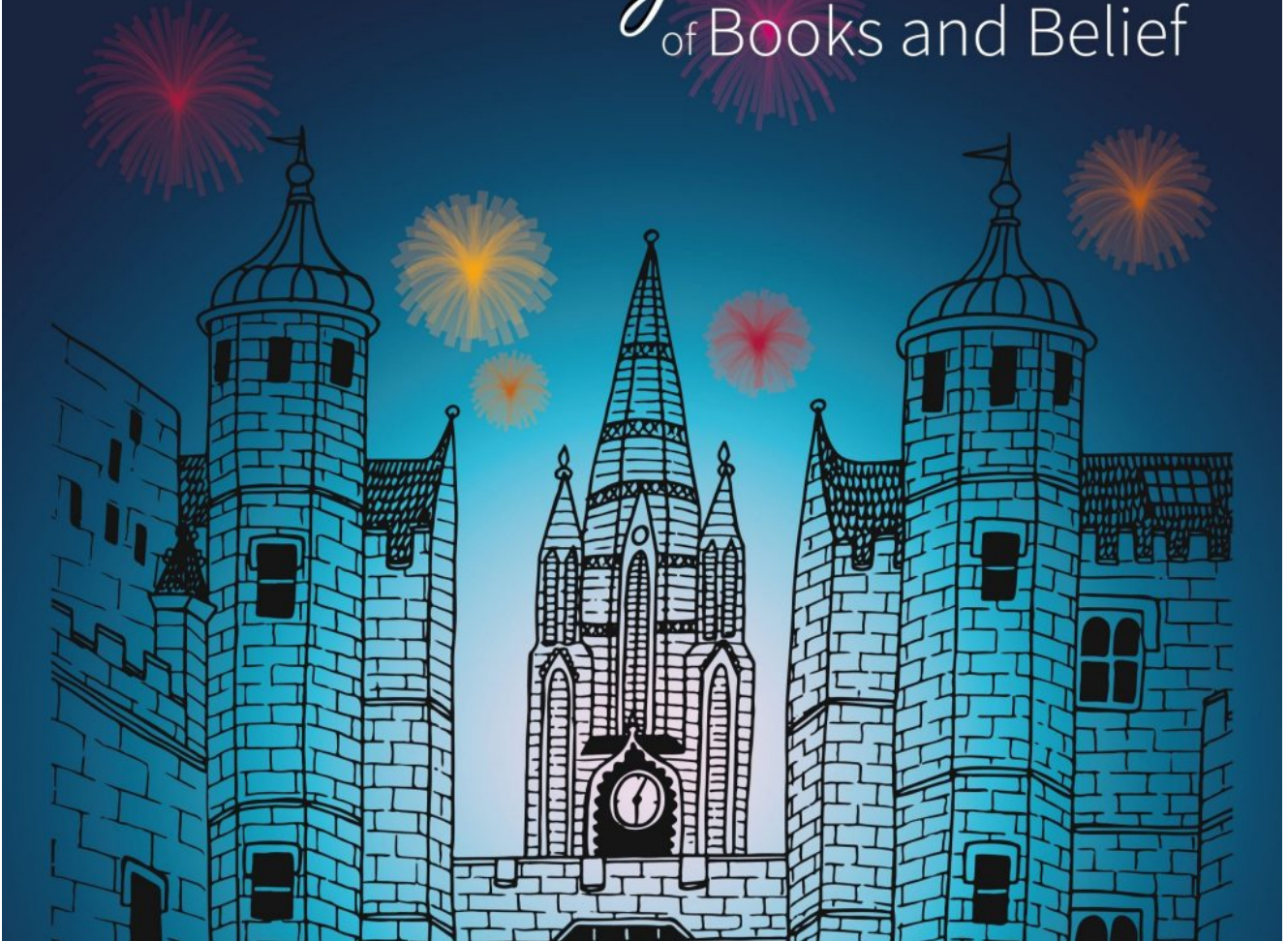
prisons. After university I took a year out to work in another job, and one of my friends started in a graduate scheme working a women's prison. I then applied, and loved the assessment process.

"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 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.

WILL LYONS



RAISE YOUR GLASSES

New College students follow many different career paths. We caught up with Will Lyons (MA Religious Studies with History, 1999), award-winning wine writer for The Wall Street Journal and The Sunday Times, to talk about his years on the Mound.

“What attracted to me to Edinburgh was its wonderful broad course - ethics, theology, comparative religion, and modern history. I came up in 1995 and hadn’t really visited before, but had enjoyed history and religious studies at school and wanted to continue studying them.”



“It’s a world class university in a beautiful city but my focus was the course.” School was fun but not particularly intellectual. Yet I was fortunate to have friends and teachers who genuinely inspired me. Simon Gathercole, now Professor of New Testament at Cambridge was a huge influence.

“At New College, I loved the eclectic mix of students from all walks of life, and from all over the world. Rainy Hall and the library became part of my life. We enjoyed lunch there and believe it or not it was where I learned to send my first email!

“Compared to other faculties, New College was very diverse. Marcella Althaus Reid was my tutor and New College inspired me to knuckle down and work hard. The library and tutorial discussions gave me an understanding of how humanity ticks. As you go into journalism, that helps.

“Frank Whaling’s lectures on comparative religion were a highlight. His class was like a global journey through religions across the ages. I met Kate, now my wife, during one of his lectures!

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“Jolyon Mitchell’s media ethics courses were very lively too. But it could be rigorous. Michael Northcott’s feedback on my essays was exacting and he certainly helped me develop my style as a writer. How did Will move from New College to The Sunday Times? “I joined the University Wine Society, and ended up becoming its president. I also started writing for the student newspaper. After graduation, I became a wine merchant before taking a postgrad qualification in journalism in Cardiff.

“I started at The Scotsman, moved to The Wall Street Journal in London and am now at The Sunday Times. His advice to those considering a degree in theology or religious studies?

“University is a period of reflection and intellectual growth. You can learn skills for the workforce quickly afterwards. But my studies gave me a hinterland of understanding humanity, and that is invaluable.

RACHEL MUERS



DRIVING TRADITION FORWARD

This summer, Rachel Muers will take up the oldest professorial chair at the University of Edinburgh – the Chair of Divinity, established in 1620 as part of a drive to turn what was the Town’s College into the University of Edinburgh. An outstanding theologian, Muers will make history as both the first Quaker, and the first woman, to hold the post in its 402 year history.

“It’s an august line to step into. It feels a bit odd, but I’ve been doing things that feel a bit odd for a long time!” Muers’ engagement with theology began when reading Bonhoeffer’s Letters from Prison as a 16 year old. “I thought it was amazing! I was enthusiastic about lots of disciplines, but in theology I found one discipline that contained them all. I fell in love with the richness of the subject in its ability to ask the biggest questions in the company of people who have lived across two millennia.”

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In my own work, I look at emerging questions of societal import, and ask ‘what does theology have to say in response?’ Society poses profound questions to the theological tradition, and they call for theological responses that are both critical and constructive.

“When the chair was first created, its incumbent was expected to make students “dispute” once a week – a way of testing out ideas through lively debate rooted in Medieval academic culture.

Muers’ own approach to teaching drives that tradition forward: “As a teacher, I am persistently interested in trying to help students think about thinkers whose assumptions are different to their own. In my classes, we always ask why someone thought as they did. They had reasons, and it’s important we understand them. Theology and Religious Studies are so important because they have the ability to train that kind of intellectual empathy, which is more important than ever in the contemporary world. In theology, we do that all the time.”

What excites Muers about coming to Edinburgh? “Apart from that Edinburgh itself is a beautiful city, New College is a theological community with a great

reputation. It brings together individual scholars in a community where ideas cross-fertilise. It has a strength of tradition, but that tradition also looks outwards - for example, in thinking about Christianity globally, and in theology's responsibilities within the academy and society.

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THE LORD LYON



WORKING BETWEEN WORLDS

As part of our 175 celebrations, New College was granted a Coat of Arms - an initiative suggested by our alumnus the Lord Lyon, Dr Joseph Morrow. The Lord Lyon's own story is an unusual one, combining a high-profile career in law with church work in challenging social settings.

"I grew up in Fife, in an Episcopalian family. There wasn't a certificate in religious studies at my high school, but through a supportive teacher I was able to do the Cambridge O-level in religious studies. Growing up, I felt ambivalent about

ministry. I had impostor syndrome: how could someone from my background be a priest? But I chose to start a degree in theology.

“It wasn’t a popular move with my family, who thought I was cut out for medicine, law, or accountancy. I’m very single-minded, though, and I’m still like that. I have lost none of my enthusiasm!

“Coming to New College was quite an experience. I had worked as a parcel boy in a town in Fife. There was a lot of great thinking on theology and society in Edinburgh. That caught my imagination.

“In the late 1970s, New College was primarily young, male, and focused on vocational training for ministry. I used to arrive in the quad on a motorbike and park behind John Knox.



“The environment was quite relaxed. Some of my friends from those days have gone on to do remarkable things. After New College, I was ordained in Dundee Cathedral. I spent 9 years in a working class congregation there.

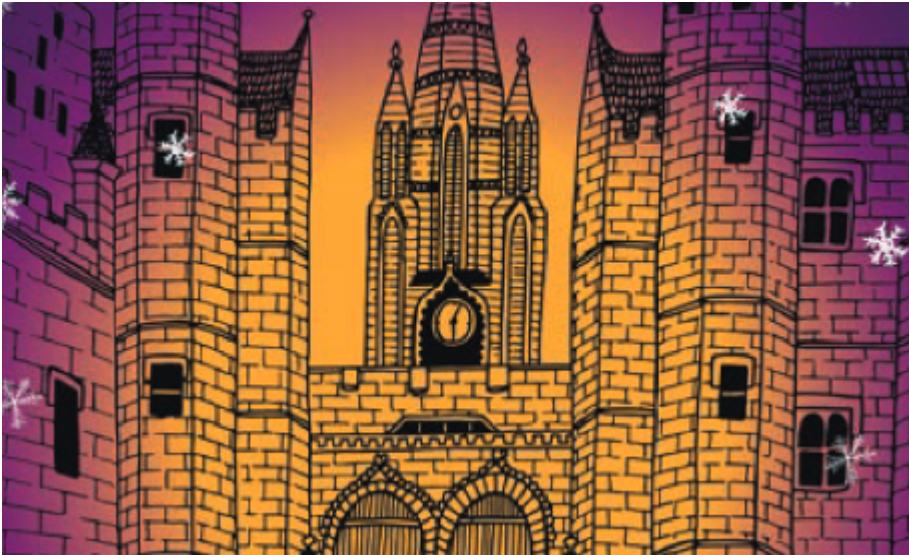
“The church was between two 15 storey tower blocks in a disheartened community. It was a great time. We formed a community centre. I learned to look at theology in a different way, from the experience of people in the community. At the same time, I was studying law part-time.

“I qualified, and ended up working in mental health law, before going to the bar as an advocate. Those steps were all shaped by the rigour of my theological training. J. B. Torrance’s teaching on grace and law was a formative influence on my thinking on mental health law as restorative and therapeutic. Working between the church and the law was exhilarating.

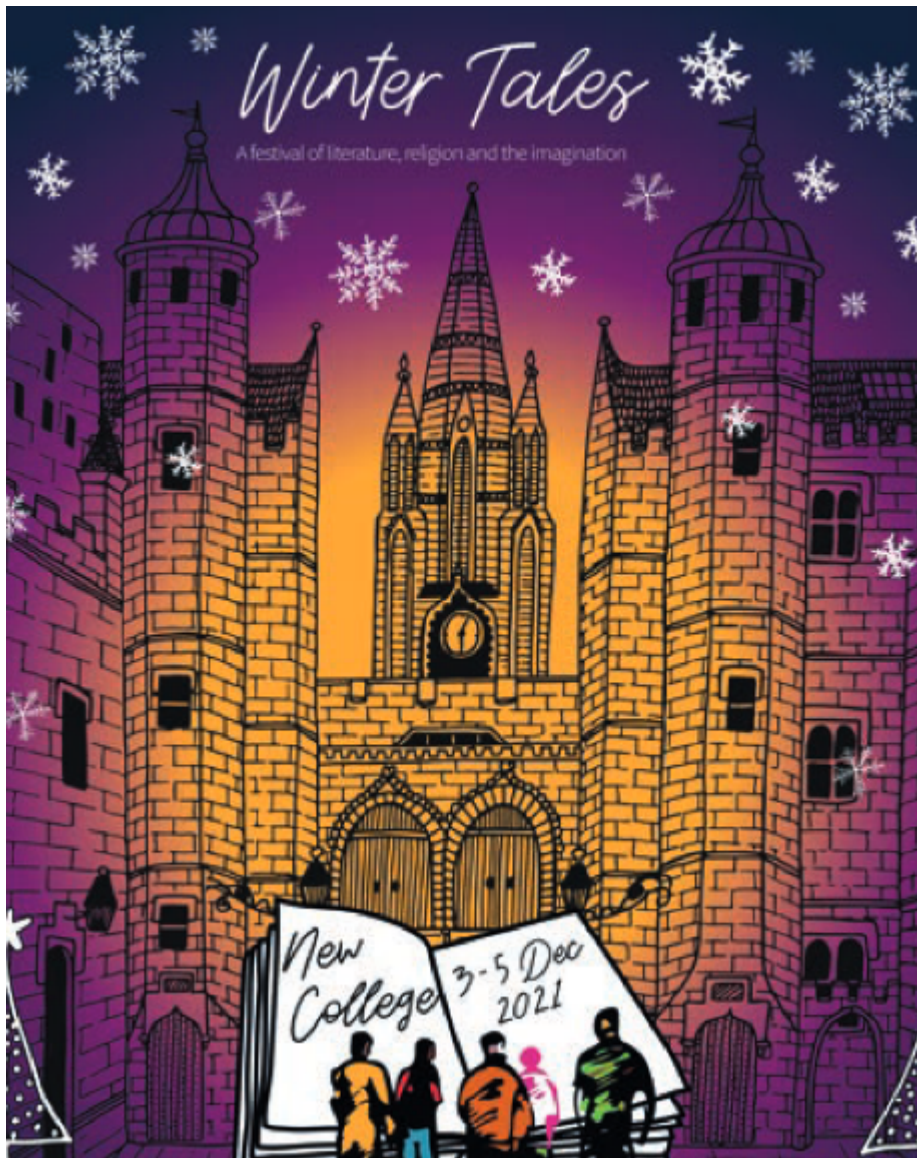
“New College now is a very open place. The staff and students come from all over

the world. It's a diverse and equal place for anyone to come and study."

WINTER TALES



“ Winter Tales was an exciting innovation for the School of Divinity, bringing novelists, poets and storytellers together with readers of all ages.



At the end last year, our 175th anniversary celebrations came to a close with the inaugural Winter Tales festival of Literature, Religion, and the Imagination - a weekend-long event led by Prof. Jolyon Mitchell and Dr Alison Jack that saw a stellar cast of authors address audiences in the Assembly Hall, including the Costa Book Award winner Francis Spufford, Marina Warner, and New College alumnus Miles Jupp. Dr Jack hopes that the event will be the first of many. "Winter Tales was an exciting innovation for the School of Divinity, bringing novelists, poets and storytellers together with readers of all ages. Writers such as Val McDermid,



Sally Magnusson and Robert Harris held us spellbound as they spoke about the complex relationship between religion and literature in their novels. “Plans for the New College Festival of Books and Belief this November are well underway, building on the success of Winter Tales. I’m looking forward to it already!”