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Quiet Scot who was a master of words (1967)¹

Edited by Caroline Macafee, 2015

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William Alexander Craigie, whose centenary falls to-morrow, was perhaps the great Scottish philologist of this century. He edited three great dictionaries and wrote in addition over 150 books, articles, and notes. His inspiration brought about several other major scholarly enterprises.

As a person he was simple and unpretentious, and in many ways he fulfilled the character of the ideal scholar. Two nations owe him a special debt – his native Scotland and our northern neighbour Iceland. For Scotland he made the suggestion that ultimately gave rise to the *Scottish National Dictionary*, and himself founded and edited the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*. He edited many important medieval Scottish literary texts and wrote much else on Scottish language and literature.

For Iceland he revived the study of Old Icelandic at Oxford in 1905 and wrote works, some of them classics, on most aspects of Icelandic literature, but the Icelanders remember him especially as the man who did most to foster the study of the *rímur*, a peculiarly Icelandic (and technically highly difficult) genre of verse which flourished there from medieval down to modern times.²

His mastery of Icelandic language and literature were probably greater than any non-Icelander ever achieved.

¹ Originally published in *The Glasgow Herald*, 12 August 1967. [Online] <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=D1xAAAAAIBAJ&siid=c6MMAAAAIBAJ&pg=3963%2C1856099>.

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All notes are editorial. There is a photograph of Craigie in the original article, which is omitted here. The only other editorial change, apart from the addition of notes, is the accent in *rímur*.

This article was written to coincide with an exhibition, to which AJA contributed, held at the National Library of Scotland to mark the centenary of Craigie's birth. AJA had retained an earlier MS draft of this article, entitled 'Craigie of the *rímur*' and also a MS, headed 'Broadcast', from around the same time, which again gives Craigie's biography; some additional material from these is included here in notes.

Around 1963, AJA also contributed the original entry 'Craigie, Sir William Alexander (1867–1957)' in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (now the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*).

² From AJA's draft:

He made four visits to Iceland itself, in 1905 and 1910, then in 1930 as a guest of honour at the thousandth anniversary of the Althing (Parliament). On his last visit at the invitation of the newly founded Rímur Society in 1948, he delivered a memorable lecture on *rímur* to a University gathering – this was given the place of honour as the Society's first publication – and on the final day of his visit broadcast a moving farewell message to the Icelandic people.

He was born in Dundee on August 13, 1867, the youngest son of a jobbing gardener. At school³ and university (St Andrews and Oxford), where he took all the prizes that were going,⁴ he was already showing his capacity to combine with his regular work a great body of additional study – the latter at this time including early Scottish literature, Gaelic, Scandinavian, French, and German.

The winter of 1892–93 he spent in Copenhagen furthering his Icelandic studies and reading and transcribing Icelandic manuscripts. He was received into a circle of young Icelandic scholars and poets from whom he perfected his modern Icelandic. For the next four years he was assistant in Latin at this Alma Mater, St Andrews, and was now writing copiously on his chosen subjects. To this period belong his works on Burns, including his admirable *Primer of Burns* (1896), and the many translations from Scandinavian, which he contributed to Andrew Lang's collection of fairy tales.

The year 1897 brought his marriage to another Dundonian, Jessie Hutchen, who, for the 50 years of their companionship (she died in 1947), was to prove a tower of strength to her husband, supporting and encouraging him in all his enterprises, attending to all his needs and championing him with greater outspokenness than was possible to his own reserved and modest character.⁵

The couple were just about to set out for Denmark on their honeymoon when the news arrived of another turning-point in Craigie's life – a totally unexpected invitation to join the staff of the *New English Dictionary* (later known as the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Craigie at once accepted the invitation, the honeymoon was cancelled, and he and his bride set out for Oxford. After training under the Dictionary's editors, Dr (later Sir) James A. H. Murray and Dr Henry Bradley, in 1901 Craigie was duly appointed as the third editor-in-chief, with his own separate staff.

For the remaining 60 years of his life Craigie was to be engaged on the arduous business of compiling large-scale dictionaries. He edited one-fifth of the main Oxford Dictionary and received his knighthood in 1928 on completion of this vast work, widely held to be the greatest dictionary ever written; he then went on to edit half of the first Supplement (completed in 1933) and to write the Dictionary's classic Historical Introduction.

In 1907 he gave an address to the English Association in Dundee in which he suggested that members should collect Scottish words, ballads, legends, and traditions. It was this proposal that ultimately brought about Dr William Grant's dictionary of Modern Scots, the *Scottish National Dictionary*.

³ From AJA's draft:

Already something of a prodigy in his schooldays, he began studying early Scottish literature at the age of twelve and supplementing a copy of Jamieson's *Scottish Dictionary* he possessed about the same time, having already learned Gaelic. On his native speech, the Lowland Scots of Angus, he later wrote:

And so, three things by distance still grow dearer,
Our loves, our native land, our mother tongue.

⁴ From AJA's draft:

Following the regular course of the 'lad o' pairts' of his day, Craigie proceeded from his local school, the West End Academy of Dundee to the local university, St Andrews. His academic prowess there was prodigious and legendary.

⁵ From AJA's 'Broadcast' MS:

Though he liked to get the credit which he thought was due to him for his work, he was also as unpushing a man as one could find, a man of genuine humility and modesty. The success and the many honours which he eventually won were thus the result of merit alone; lobbying or soliciting, for himself at least, were things which he was incapable of; repeatedly in his career we meet instances when others had to take steps to secure what was due to Craigie.

Then in 1919 Craigie first gave public expression to a scheme which he had been hatching for a number of years – for, in his own words, “completing the record of English” by means of the “period dictionaries.” From this initiative of Craigie’s have followed all the main advances of English and Scottish lexicography of his time and our own.

Craigie’s plan was to follow up the Oxford Dictionary with a series of separate, detailed dictionaries, one for each of the main “periods” in the history of English and Scots. His own *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, on which he commenced editorial work in 1925 (he had begun collecting some eight years earlier), was one of the components of this scheme; another was the *Dictionary of American English*, which he began in Chicago in 1925. For the next 11 years he divided his time between Chicago and Oxford pushing ahead the work on all three of his dictionaries, each a monumental work!

His contributions to lexicography would have made a very creditable lifework for two or three able scholars. Craigie is probably unique in the quantity of important additional work which he achieved.⁶ In 1905 he became lecturer in Scandinavian at Oxford; in 1915 he added to this the duties of the revived chair of Anglo-Saxon there, occupying both these posts with distinction – until his resignation in 1925 to take up his chair of English at Chicago.

In the decade following 1917 he produced many small books for beginners on Anglo-Saxon, Icelandic, and Danish. He was interested in questions of spelling reform, but, unlike most advocates of this, believed that radical changes were not only impractical but likely to be attended by serious disadvantages as well as advantages. His efforts were therefore aimed at assisting foreigners to learn the ordinary spellings.⁷

The idea for the ingenious system of “Craigie markings” which he devised for this purpose was suggested by the methods in use for teaching Arabic spelling, one of the many languages he somehow found time to learn.

His official retirement came in 1936 when he was 68, and he and Lady Craigie now settled down in “Ridgehurst,” the house they had built a number of years earlier on a spur of the Chiltern Hills near Watlington in Oxfordshire.⁸ But his retirement meant no cessation of work: he was still doing a full day’s work every day till he was 86, chiefly on the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, which he edited as far as the letter I, his monumental *Specimens of Icelandic Rímur* (1952), and his Supplement to Vigfusson’s *Icelandic Dictionary*. The latter was published only shortly before his death in 1957 when he was 90.

⁶ From AJA’s draft:

Lexicography is gruelling work and few dictionary makers are left with the time and energy for much else. Even Murray, Craigie’s master and peer as a lexicographer and himself a man of abundant zest and vigour, succeeded in writing very little else once he was embarked on the Dictionary.

This was, of course, an example that AJA himself followed.

⁷ From AJA’s draft:

This is perhaps the least radical of all the attempts in this direction and it is perhaps a pity that it is Craigie’s one venture which, though it was for a time used in practice in China and the USA, was without lasting effect.

⁸ From AJA’s ‘Broadcast’ MS:

... he was especially glad to receive anyone from Iceland to hear the news from there and to discuss Icelandic literature. I remember one friend of my own, a very humble person, who is housekeeper to her brother on a remote farm in the north-east of Iceland. She had saved up enough money to give her a trip to Britain. Craigie learned that she was here – it turned out he knew her father, who was a poet – he described him as “one of the best poets in a corner of Iceland which abounds in them” – and invited her several times to visit him. I think this gave them both very great pleasure.

Apart from his published work and his teaching Craigie had a remarkable flair for stimulating others to major enterprises of scholarship. One of these, the “period dictionaries” scheme, I have already mentioned. Another was the founding of the Icelandic Rímur Society in 1947.⁹

His work for the revival of the Frisian language was second only to that for Scots and Icelandic; this was recognised when, in 1947, he was made one of the first two honorary members of the Frisian Academy on its foundation in that year. His contributions to the research and the writings of others are legion, as hundreds of dedications or other acknowledgements testify.¹⁰

The simplicity and freedom from paraphernalia of Craigie’s ways of working matched the simplicity and straightforwardness and total freedom from any kind of pretentiousness of his character. He disliked desks with drawers, for, as he used to say, work tended to get put away in them and forgotten, and preferred working on a plain deal table. The various pieces of work he had on hand, including his millions of dictionary “slips,” were kept tidily tied up with string in separate bundles on shelves. All his letters and books were written out with a plain steel pen in his own beautifully neat and elegant handwriting.

Quiet and reserved as he was, this tiny bearded Scot – he liked to claim Pictish origins – yet had an exquisite sense of humour and a vast store of reminiscence and anecdote. But this was always kindly, for he was unfailingly courteous and considerate and shrunk from writing or saying anything which might give pain to others.

Scotsmen have every right to take pride in this gentle scholar who contributed so much to the knowledge of their own and other tongues.

⁹ From AJA’s draft:

It is appropriate that his first important contribution to this subject was his edition of *Skotlands Rímur*, a contemporary work on the Gowrie plot of 1600, and his last the majestic *Specimens of Icelandic Rímur*, which surveys the whole field.

The Icelanders’ appreciation of these and other services to their country was shown repeatedly. They bestowed upon him every honour which it was in their power to offer, but what perhaps pleased him most was the action of the Althing of Iceland in having produced a special bibliophile edition of a notable cycle of 17th century *rímur* in honour of his eightieth birthday. He gave the impression of having known personally all the poets (and their number is large) who flourished in Iceland in the earlier decades of this century. In other countries his fame was largely confined to the learned world, but in the small and very highly literate country of Iceland he was known and beloved of the whole nation. The writer of this article once had personal proof of this when being introduced in the early nineteen fifties to a group of farmers in a remote northern dale of Iceland as the assistant of “Craigie of the *rímur*”.

¹⁰ From AJA’s draft:

And when one reflects that in addition to all this, he also somehow found time to pursue his hobby of learning one new language after another, one can only marvel. On one occasion, having received an invitation to visit and lecture in Finland, he expressed his satisfaction at this chance to perfect his Finnish. He used to illustrate points in his lectures from the languages of the immigrant Frisian and Lithuanian communities in the United States, which he knew in both their original form and as modified in their new setting. The story is told that on his second visit to Romania in 1929 his knowledge of Romanian enabled him to come to the rescue of an English diplomat who had arrived at a Romanian railway-station ignorant of the language and having lost his railway ticket. Indeed Craigie was one of the most widely travelled scholars of his generation. He and Lady Craigie spent most of their vacations in this way, visiting especially the countries of Northern Europe, meeting new friends and renewing old friendships among the scholars of these countries. In 1921 they travelled round the world: Lady Craigie, it was said, crocheted her way round the world, while her husband gave lectures and learned languages.