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Title	<i>Peter McDonald on Literature</i>
Description	Summary: Peter McDonald talks about how he became to be interested in Literature, how he became to be an academic at Oxford and what it is like to study literature at Oxford.
Presenter(s)	Peter McDonald and Oliver Lewis
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Interviewer What interested you in English literature?

Peter D. McDonald: Like most people I got interested in literature at school, although I also had a mother who was particularly enthusiastic about literature with whom I had lots of arguments about it.

Yes, I read a fair amount as a teenager. I wouldn't regard myself as an excessive bibliophile at that stage, there were various writers, there was sort of... Conrad I was drawn to. I remember in my early teens there was kind of – the Everest of reading at that point was Joyce's *Ulysses* was the big thing to read which I did start but never finished as a teenager, got to it again later.

I was just drawn to the fact that there seemed to be something going on in a lot of the works that we were given that wasn't going on anywhere else in any other kind of writing. There was also difficulty, you know, encountering something like 'The Wasteland' to begin with it was just – I found it incredibly baffling and was perplexed as to why people wanted to write like that. Why make things odd and strange and make it in a sense inaccessible? I just remember being captured by that.

When I read anything else, you know a newspaper report, things in the newspaper or historical accounts of various periods or even some philosophical writing which I started to read a bit later on there was a sense in which people were trying to be clear, trying to get things clear, trying to what we understand language normally to be doing, to communicate. But then in these other things that people referred to as literature that didn't seem to be going on, they seemed to be the opposite, it seemed almost perverse.

I remember being drawn to that sense of why in a way is this shutting me out, why is this difficult and why is this strange and just being hooked by that, by that problem as it were. And I was not particularly enthusiastic about going to university I recall and deeply suspicious of academics as a profession yet I also had a very clear idea about what I wanted to do when I went there.

So there were the usual sort of teenage complications I think which is I wanted to study English literature and philosophy in fact which is what I did as an undergraduate. So I did those two subjects.

Interviewer And when did you move to Oxford?

Peter D. McDonald: I came to Oxford in 1989, so almost 20 years ago. I did a PhD here, a DPhil thesis. I then had a stint as what's called a junior research fellow, a kind of post-doctoral post at

New College which was fantastic, two years doing my own thing out of which I produced my first book which was about the connections between British literary culture and what was going on in publishing in the late 19th and early 20th century.

And then I got a permanent job at St Hugh's as one of the three English Fellows that we have here and I teach literature from 1830 to the present day, critical theory, a little bit of the history of the language, I do all of those sorts of things.

Interviewer And how is it taught here?

Peter D. McDonald: So I think perhaps one of the most interesting things about the way it's taught here, especially compared to other places where you would have a department that would be the English Department, here we have a really quite importantly specific system which allows an extraordinary amount of freedom for students because we have the faculty, which is the university body, the faculty of English language and literature in which I also have a – I have two posts as it were.

One is the university lectureship at the faculty and the other one is the college fellowship at the college level. And the faculty sets the broad parameters for the course but broadly speaking there's almost no content given to that course.

So for instance the first year students coming here would have a choice say in one – there would be four papers in their first year but one of the papers would be a choice between either doing in fact Victorian literature or modern literature, so either doing literature from 1830 to roughly 1900 or 1900 to the present day.

And all the faculty will really do is stipulate those dates; the content of the course is really decided between the students and the tutors at the college level. We decide what content there's going to be and when you're coming up in your first year inevitably a tutor will send out a preliminary reading list which will give you some idea of what to work with and at St Hugh's we try to maximise people's chances to choose what they want to do. And that choice, a limited choice, gets even more pronounced as you go through the second and third year because then you start to operate under your own steam.

So that's the one thing, there isn't as it were a syllabus; there are just these broad period papers and also other kinds of papers. So papers where you focus on a special author where there is actually a little bit more direction given by the faculty, where there's a list of authors. But there are other papers that are kind of... say for instance Fiction in English where you can write on the genre of the novel say or short stories.

And there again there's no content, you decide what moment in the history of the novel you want to examine, which novelists you want to look at, those kinds of things. And the students do what they want to do, we either teach them or find tutors who can teach them for that. That's the one thing I think that's a key thing about the course.

And the other thing is that it still has this extraordinary historical range, it's 1,400 years but the two things work together insofar as you've got this 1,400 years of English literature, so from Anglo Saxon old English to the present day and the globalised English that we now have but you would choose your own pathway through those 1,400/500 years whatever it is now so you can get both an extraordinary historical range and kind of freedom to choose what aspects you want to emphasise.

There's a real sense in which people can construct their own version of the course. And we do that collectively as a group, a year group will emphasise certain things but then also individuals will do it as they start to specialise further in the final year.

Interviewer So in tutorials would there be some common purchase, thematic, or would it just be literary criticism of the text they're looking at?

Peter D. McDonald: Again it can vary from student to student, from paper to paper as to what you do. So for instance there are some papers which are much more task oriented and there would be specific ways in which you would handle it.

So for the History of the Language for instance we might have a specific class followed by some tutorials on just simply the concept of metaphor. So that would be much more focused, people would do specific sorts of presentations around a clearly defined area.

But when it comes to the period papers you choose which authors you're interested in working on and we try to group the students together if they've made the same choices. So you'll work normally in pairs or in a group of three but quite regularly also there's just one on one because nobody else has chosen to say work on George Eliot.

Then I would always want to know if there's something that they specifically want, having read the work before. I mean that's one of the things that the system really only works if you have arrived here having read all the stuff you want to do. But if you have particular ideas of aspects of things that you want to cover then we try to build that into the essay that the student then goes off to research and write. Otherwise they're happy to ask me for advice and pointers about where to go.

So for instance in one week we might choose say two George Eliot novels, 'Adam Bede' and 'Middlemarch' and try to write a topic which focuses on say either something like George Eliot's views on the novel, her sense of what it is to write in that mode at that moment in the mid-19th century, what her views on the novel were, how her views on the novel were different to other people's views and how she then put that into practice in terms of how we actually read and think about what she wrote.

Or for instance how George Eliot opened up her own language and her own writing to all sorts of other kinds of writing around her at the time, say for instance scientific writing, how she absorbs all of that into her own style of writing so that we can define all those sorts of topics as we go along.

Interviewer Are there any common works which students look at year after year?

Peter D. McDonald: No not really, I mean different tutors in different colleges do these things differently. But certainly what I have is I will teach in a combination of tutorials and classes and the classes will give that particular subsection of any year group that's chosen say to do Victorian literature – and sometimes it's only three out of the ten will have chosen Victorian literature the other seven will be doing modern literature – and there will be certain classes where you will cover a common group of texts and everybody will contribute in one way or another.

And normally what we try to do is make the classes different to the tutorial so the tutorials are the opportunity to do author specific work, so you'll have two weeks on George Eliot or two weeks on Dickens or on Arthur Hugh Clough or Oscar Wilde or whatever it might be for the Victorian period. And then for the classes we will think more in terms of a topic, so try to make sure that we don't do author specific work but can cross authors, so you'll have a group of authors, or a debate between two authors.

Say for instance the dispute that Matthew Arnold had with Arthur Hugh Clough about the nature of poetic language or something like that. We would pick up on a topic where you've got at least two authors involved in a discussion and debate with each other so that we can combine those two levels of engagement.

Interviewer What are some of the texts that people have looked at in the last couple of years?

Peter D. McDonald: Oh I mean it's just huge but I constantly try to encourage students to look at popular fiction as well as the kind of version of canonical Victorian literature that they get from school. So Sherlock Holmes, what was called the sensation novel writers like Rhoda Broughton,

people like that? And that works sometimes, I manage to get a few people interested in popular literature but it's not very successful.

I mean otherwise it's really all the major Victorian novelists you can think of and poets, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, Clough, Christina Rossetti. Then in terms of novelists the Brontes are all extremely popular, George Eliot, Dickens, Hardy is very popular, Oscar Wilde.

But also we try to look at other things, bring in some other figures. People are interested in the gothic novel, look at Rider Haggard, 'Dracula' and then also look at some of the more obscure new women writers of the 1890s, that's also a fairly popular area that we can look at.

But then in the 20th century I mean again it ranges from Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Yates, all that kind of higher modernist crowd, but right up to now. People are doing work on Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, Zadie Smith, J. N. Coetzee, the whole gamut.

Interviewer Is there a cut-off point?

Peter D. McDonald: Oxford used to have extremely draconian cut-off points which at one stage effectively ruled out most of the 20th century, now it goes up to the present day so students do write on things that were published in 2008.

Interviewer And how prepared are the students when they come up from school?

Peter D. McDonald: Of course people vary in terms of the amount of summer reading they do but on the whole it works pretty well and certainly once you get here you realise that if you're not adequately prepared by the time you get into the term it really is just too much to do. I mean it would be completely unreasonable to expect people to read for the first time the amount of primary material we expect them to read in the course of a term plus research and write essays.

So the whole system works on the fact that you've really read and prepared the primary material that you've chosen, that you want to specialise in, so that you can then come and make the term into the kind of real sort of intellectual adventure that the term should be in terms of thinking about what you've read in relation to debates of the past and of the present about those works.

So you can read up on secondary sources, you can just do some more adventurous kind of research in the libraries. I always try to encourage undergraduates to remember that their university card gives them access to the Bodleian Library which is one of the great libraries of the world and they have the right to go there and they should use it.

So going up and calling up obscure little modernist magazines in order to look at where 'The Wasteland' first appeared in a magazine or a Victorian periodical, you know you can go and do that and you can do that kind of work here so we try to encourage them to do that sort of thing. To make it work you really need to do that.

And in the summer after your 'A' levels people are variously prepared when they arrive here but quickly learn that to benefit from being here, to just benefit from everything we have to offer you really need to read well. And we get extremely good students, they can write incredibly well, intellectually ambitious. Everybody here works hard.

Interviewer What level of linguistic complexity do they have when they arrive?

Peter D. McDonald: I mean again everybody can take views on where the language is going and all those big issues. Certainly here because of the nature of the admissions process and the selection procedures and so on and the students who apply who want to come here we have I think on the whole incredibly articulate students who can write really well.

And I spend most of my time encouraging students to make the most of the opportunity that you have here and what the tutorial system offers you which is that you can be intellectually ambitious.

But there isn't a recipe as to what you've got to do, so arriving from 'A' level if there's anything that we can provide that's new that will be different from what they've done in 'A' level it's just

simply that writing is a craft, there isn't a recipe. There aren't a whole load of points that you must fulfil in an essay, it's really a question of you defining the essay form for yourself and what you can do with it.

Because the tutorial system offers you a week by week discussion where in effect the consequences of what you produce in an essay are just between you and the tutor, it is continuous assessment but it isn't the pain of continuous assessment which is that every essay is marked and recorded, so if you have a flop in week two that's held against you for the rest of your life. That doesn't happen at all.

So we only have the end of the first year exams and then really there's the end of the third year exams although you do one exam in your second year but that only comes out and is finally processed with the final exam. And those are university exams, at the college level it's just a continuous conversation and discussion about your work.

And I spend most of my time just encouraging people to take advantage of the system in that way, to be intellectually ambitious, to write things that might turn out to be a flop but if you've really had a good shot at doing something that's better than writing a rather timid po-faced essay. You can do that kind of thing.

I don't spend a lot of time helping people with their prose, sentence by sentence, how to construct a sentence; they can do that by the time they get here. It's really about helping you with argument, really about helping you pose the kinds of questions that might be a bit more interesting and might step things up from the kinds of questions you might have been able to ask before.

Interviewer And if one was thinking of coming up to Oxford or applying how would you suggest they prepare? Certain texts or just read what they're interested in?

Peter D. McDonald: I would say one of the key things to do is to give an indication that you have a passionate interest in the subject, which is not just schooled, so that you will naturally want to read outside the school syllabus and have read and you can give evidence for that. That you really are driven by your own internal ambitions and desires, you're not just being led by the institution, by teachers obviously and so on.

You know people again have different views on this but I think just as wide a reading as possible would be great. Little things like if you've done a Hardy novel for A level, just evidence the fact that because of that you just went and read a whole lot of other Hardy novels off your own bat, you know, that's great. That's going to give us the assurance that there is something that's really driving you to do this subject and to come to a place where the demands are high, rightly high, on what you need. So you'll need that kind of drive to flourish in the system here.

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