

A. J. Aitken

The Playboy of the West Germanic World [1995]¹

Edited by Caroline Macafee, 2015

Editor's note: in this previously unpublished talk, AJA pays tribute to teachers and colleagues who influenced him: J. Dover Wilson, Donald Wolfitt, O. K. Schram, Sir William Craigie and David Abercrombie. He also describes something of his university education and the early years of his career. Some of the context of his own work is also mentioned in his tribute to Angus McIntosh ('Angus McIntosh and Scottish studies', 1981, 2015).

Edinburgh Studies in English and Scots, edited by AJA and others (1971), is dedicated to Schram's memory. AJA contributed the entry for Craigie in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (now the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*), as well as reviewing *A Memoir and a List of the Published Writings of Sir William A Craigie* in 1953, and marking Craigie's centenary with a contribution to an exhibition in the National Library of Scotland. The newspaper item 'Quiet Scot who was a master of words' (1967, 2015) is from the same time. AJA wrote an obituary of Abercrombie (1992).

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I need to begin by explaining the title. I graduated from Edinburgh University in English Language and Literature, specialising in Language, in 1947. The following year, I was appointed Assistant to the Lecturer in English Language, Dr O. K. Schram. At that time, two full years of study of English Language were an obligatory part of the Honours English curriculum, and the emphasis in English Language was on the early history of the language (up to the time of Chaucer) and on formal characteristics of the language. So students had to learn about sound changes like Grimm's Law and i-mutation, Anglo-Saxon declensions and conjugations, and similarly for Middle English. Not surprisingly, all of this was deeply unpopular with most students. My own stint of teaching – the two of us covered the whole two year course between us – included the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, some Anglo-Saxon heroic poems, Anglo-Saxon metre, and various Middle English texts as a concomitant of the Anglo-Saxon verse, and some account of the manners and ethos of the West Germanic peoples. At the end of the year, the Junior Honours class gave, as was the custom, a party for the Finalists and the staff. A centre-piece of this in 1948 was a play, or skit, written by the late Alex. Rodger, all about the adventures of a juvenile hero in a parody of Anglo-Saxon society, entitled 'The Playboy of the West Germanic World'. The hero's name, it turned out, was Jack – the same as mine.

Now when first asked to give this talk, one theme suggested as suitable was something associated with Edinburgh University, so it occurred to me to talk about some people who greatly impressed and influenced me, and, to a lesser extent, events that I took part in, in my early years at Edinburgh University, that is to say, the years 1939–41 and just after the war, when the people I'll be discussing were wandered among [sic] as the Playboy of the West Germanic World.

¹ Talk given to the Edinburgh University Dining Society, previously unpublished. Correspondence suggests that the lecture was given on a date between 19 October and 10 December, 1995. The text has been verbally expanded from AJA's manuscript notes, contained in four small notebooks. All notes are editorial.

My first two years at university were 1939–41, the first two years of the War. I had the great good fortune to attend in the days when the old teaching regimen prevailed, whereby the departmental *Professor* (there was normally only one then), himself conducted most of the First Ordinary Class. So the Professor of British History carried on a series of lectures throughout the year – from pre-history to the present century – and the Professor of English conducted the Ordinary Class, as they used to say then, from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf. That was in each case something like 70 or 80 lectures in all, which must have been a very demanding task when the Professor was first appointed. I mentioned British History and English deliberately because I was also fortunate that there were two immensely distinguished and enthralling teachers as Professors of these subjects in my first year. Their names were V. H. Galbraith in British History, and J. D. Wilson in English Literature. In those days – I don't know what happens now – students used to shop around and attend lectures in subjects other than those enrolled for, just to hear a famous teacher. Both Galbraith and Dover Wilson in that way commonly attracted numerous extras to the audiences at their lectures.

Partly for reasons of time and partly because I didn't know them personally as I did my teachers after the War, I will say no more of Galbraith and only a little of Dover Wilson.

Galbraith had a great reputation for sagacity – at least with his students – and at History Society meetings used to get asked impossible questions – like the very topical one then: how could we prevent future wars? He was a kenspeckle figure with a great mop of uncombed white hair – this was at a time when men kept their hair close-cropped – and a reputation for never getting a haircut. Once in my time the word went round the university, or at least the Arts Faculty, like wildfire, “Galbraith has had his hair cut,” and a great concourse gathered to cheer him across the Old Quad as he arrived for his morning lecture. (Then all the Arts departments were located either in the Old Quad or across the way in Chambers Street.)²

Dover Wilson was one of the leading Shakespeare scholars of his time – historian, critic, textual scholar, and editor. He lectured on other Shakespearian topics to more senior classes, such as textual criticism and authorship (at that time there was something of a vogue, to which Dover Wilson did not subscribe, for attributing the works of Shakespeare to other authors – Francis Bacon and others). But in his Shakespeare lectures to the First Ordinary Class he confined himself to enthralling examinations of what the plays were about. This was also the theme of a number of his books, such as one called *What Happens in Hamlet*.

As well as his own lectures, Dover Wilson arranged for us to have a lecture from his friend, the actor-manager Donald Wolfit. I will say a little about Wolfit. Wolfit led a theatrical company which toured Britain, staying in each of a number of centres for a fortnight, and performing mostly Shakespeare, occasionally Ben Jonson, in repertory, a different play every night, with Wolfit playing the lead in each play – Hamlet one night, then Touchstone the next, then Othello, then Malvolio, then Shylock, then Volpone, and so on, quite a feat of memorisation at the very least. As you can imagine, the arrival of the Wolfit company was a memorable occasion for keen English Literature students like me.

I said Wolfit played the lead in each play. This was because, even though the character he played was not strictly the leading character, say Touchstone, Malvolio or Bottom, it somehow became the lead, the one the audience were most interested in, simply by the presence and authority of Wolfit's acting. In this way, though there were several other able actors in the company, including Wolfit's wife, Rosalind Iden, Wolfit totally dominated the company. He was the star. They were his support. I always regarded him as the greatest actor

² This paragraph is scored out in the manuscript. Most crossed-out material has been heavily cancelled and replaced by other wording, but some material, including some autobiographical information already published in Aitken (1981, 2015), is lightly scored through and was perhaps sacrificed for reasons of timing. The lightly scored-out material has been included here in the text, but the scoring is noted.

I ever witnessed. He is often described as the last of the great actor-managers. He was a large man, with a great lion's head, beetle-browed, with thick black hair, a big round fruity voice, and tremendous verve and presence. He spoke, of course, with a full RP accent – at that time it was unthinkable to perform Shakespeare, or at least the serious characters in Shakespeare, even in *Macbeth*, in any other accent. (Judging from the recent *Hamlet* at the Lyceum, it still is.) Wolfit's forte was larger than life characters, such as Lear, Volpone, or Falstaff. Other characters, say Othello or Hamlet, he also performed as larger than life. He excelled in the set speeches, which he trumpeted out in his great voice.

At one of his performances of Lear, one of my classmates actually fainted. Seat next the aisle, just slumped over into the aisle.³

As one can imagine, his performance of the storm scene in *King Lear* was incomparable – in that scene the actor playing Lear has to, in effect, create the storm himself by his delivery of the poetry. At least he had to in Shakespeare's own time. Wolfit also occasionally did parts on radio or in films. I remember him vividly as the ebullient and sinister orator, the Bailiff, in Wyndham Lewis' *The Human Age* and as Sergeant Buzfuz in *The Pickwick Papers*, when he did the 'chops and tomato sauce' speech to perfection.

At the end of each stage performance he also gave a curtain speech, which the audience always looked forward to. I can still remember him in his doublet and hose cross-gartered as Malvolio, supporting himself by the curtain, or visibly totally wrung out after a performance of *King Lear*. His company always, of course, dressed in Elizabethan or, for *Macbeth* or *Lear*, Dark Age costume, not any of the way-out or modern dress shows we get nowadays. The sets he used, I think, were minimal – there was no elaborate scenery or special effects. It was the acting that counted.

As far as I can remember, in the lecture he gave under Dover Wilson's auspices to the First Ordinary Class, he talked of the various sorts of problem confronting anyone putting on an actual performance of a Shakespeare play – including major questions like how exactly to treat Hamlet's madness: was it real or was it feigned, or at times one and at times the other; what extra business to put in, say to explain something unexplained in the original text; and also the interpretation problems caused by the many textual cruxes or ambiguities: "O that this too too solid flesh would melt" – or should it be 'sullied'? Wolfit thought 'sullied'; and "No, this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine / Making the green one red." Is it "making the green-one red" or "making the green, one red"? Wolfit opted for the latter. He died in 1968, the same year as Schram.

In 1941 I was called up and didn't return to university till October 1945, but which time Galbraith and Dover Wilson had both left the university. I had by this time decided to specialise in English Language – at that time I was specially interested in the language of Shakespeare – and the Lecturer in English Language was Dr O. K. Schram, whose Assistant I later became. In origin, Schram was a Belgian Fleming, hence his rather unusual first names, which he never revealed, always just O. K. Schram or O. K. His first names in fact were Odon Karel. His English was impeccable, except for a slightly over-precise pronunciation, and a hint of a Welsh accent. His family came to Britain in 1914 as refugees from the German occupation of Belgium and were sent to live in a Welsh village. Schram himself was just 14. They were totally penniless and survived entirely thanks to the help given them by the local inhabitants. Later the father was able to get some teaching work and Schram himself won a scholarship to Aberystwyth University College. After the War (the First World War, that is) they settled down in Norwich and became British citizens. About this time, Schram senior summoned Odon and his brother and impressed on them the debt of gratitude they

³ This paragraph is scored out in the manuscript.

owed to the people of Britain, and urged them to do anything they could to repay this. Schram never forgot this.

Like other naturalised refugees I have known, Schram was utterly and completely patriotic. And of course he had a very soft spot for those of his students who went off to the War, such as myself. He corresponded with several of us, and I used to get letters from him in various distant parts.

He was expert in all the early Germanic languages, and a leading authority on English and Scottish place-names and English surnames. In the course of his life he amassed a huge collection of records of the place-names of Norfolk, publication of which was to follow his retirement. Unfortunately he died just after he retired, with a great deal of work still needed on his material.

That was in 1968. The material was inherited by a Swedish place-name scholar and the first volume of a two-volume study of Norfolk Place-names is just about to appear, based on Schram's collection.⁴

Schram was not, in my opinion, a very good lecturer. He dealt rather pedestrianly in dry-as-dust facts and made no effort to indicate the more general implications of the details he was setting out.

Where he shone, and where some of us found him immensely stimulating, was in his tutorials. As he was comfortably off and a bachelor – two indispensable conditions for total freedom – he was able to indulge his passion for collecting, studying catalogues and regularly attending auction sales, such as those as Dowell's, which is now Phillips, in George Street. So he collected paintings, books, a vast number of original medieval manuscripts, mostly Scots and English, stamps and coins – he had a large collection of these, Anglo-Saxon, Roman and medieval coins – and he had a large collection of replicas of Anglo-Saxon and other Germanic runic and other objects, as well as some he had made himself, like the rune stick he used to demonstrate how runic writing originated. (Runic is a Germanic writing system derived from, but independent of, Roman writing.) He would produce the relevant parts of all of this material to enliven his tutorials. So, for example, he had a replica of the Franks Casket, the early Northumbrian whalebone casket, now in the British Museum, that is carved with scenes of Germanic legend and has inscriptions partly in runic. When discussing Anglo-Saxon coinage he was able actually to produce specimens of the coins in question.

He knew all there was to know about all the different kinds of runic writing and about ogam writing. In addition, when Tolkien's books came out, he at once made himself a master of Elvish. He used to correspond with one of my children in Elvish.

He was a very generous man in every way, perhaps especially to the children of his friends and colleagues at Christmas. On Christmas morning my children looked for Dr Schram's present before that of Santa Claus. Unlike the children's parents, Schram didn't bother if presents were sensible or educational (though lots of his presents were), as long as they were fun.

From Schram I got, as they say, a good solid grounding in English philology. So did great numbers of other students, for Schram taught English Language in Edinburgh for 31 years. Not all of these students enjoyed this at the time, but some I know look back on what they learned from him with gratitude and indeed with a sense of accomplishment, such as one gets from climbing a mountain.

After I graduated in 1947, Schram asked me to stay on as successor to his previous Assistant, Miss Mary Salu, who had just left. This would not be allowed now without a contest, but it was then. At the end of my first year in this position, that is as Playboy of the

⁴ This paragraph is scored out in the manuscript. *The Place-Names of Norfolk*, by Karl Inge Sandred *et al.*, was eventually published in three volumes, 1989–2002.

West Germanic World, I was looking around for a job, because all assistant lectureships were strictly temporary, when one day my professor, Prof. Renwick, who had succeeded Dover Wilson, came to me with a letter in his hand, saying, "Here, Aitken, is a job for you." It seemed that Sir William Craigie, the great lexicographer (dictionary-maker) had written to the heads of English all over the country asking them to submit names of junior philologists for the post of assistant on his great *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (DOST).

In 1915 Craigie had conceived the idea of what's called a historical dictionary of Older Scots – by the way, that is Lowland Scots, not Gaelic – from its beginnings in the 12th century down to 1700. This was the period when Scots, not English, was the official and general language of this city. He started collecting for his dictionary in 1921, incidentally the year I was born, and actually editing in 1929. Because of various hold-ups, especially that he was editing other dictionaries at the same time, by 1947 Craigie had only reached the beginning of G. This was eleven years after his retirement and he was then 80 years old. DOST is a vast work. Already to the beginning of G it ran to 1400 double-column pages, so obviously Craigie could not complete it. (I will just add, in parentheses, that it is now published as far as the beginning of S, and edited beyond the end of S and so far in print it runs to 7½ large volumes, totalling 5500 pages. We hoped to finish by the end of the century.⁵) To solve this problem, one of his friends took it upon himself to go round the Principals of all the four Scottish universities inviting them to put up the funds to engage an assistant and potential successor for Craigie, who at that time was single-handed. Three of them agreed to do so. Ironically, the one that wouldn't join in this arrangement was Craigie's own *alma mater*, St Andrews. Anyway, thanks to the other three universities, Craigie was able to advertise for an assistant, offering the reasonable stipend of £750 a year – this compares with an assistant lecturer's salary of £400 a year.

He got about a dozen applicants, all of them, he later told me, "Quite unsuitable, Aitken, quite unsuitable." One was a certain C. M. Grieve – that is, of course, Hugh MacDiarmid. So a year later he tried the different tack of circulating professors of English and the upshot of that was that I, after taking one night to think the business over, agreed to my name being put forward. According to the British Academy memoir on Craigie, "He insisted on choosing his successor himself and turned down a great many offers" (*A Memoir and a List of the Published Writings of Sir William A Craigie*, 1952). Well, he did choose me, and after a month sitting at his feet, so to speak, in the study of his house on the Chiltern Hills, at a place called Christmas Common near Oxford, I returned to Edinburgh and started work.

Strictly, Craigie does not belong in this talk, for he was not an Edinburgh graduate – his only connection with Edinburgh was through the dictionary. However, it was agreed in discussions with Angus McIntosh, who in 1948 had just been appointed as the first Forbes Professor of English Language in Edinburgh, that I would work in Edinburgh and that the future stewardship of the dictionary's material would be an Edinburgh University responsibility. So Craigie bequeathed the whole dictionary collection to Edinburgh University and in 1952 a pantechicon arrived at my office in Minto House, Chambers Street, containing 28 large cartons (about 1½ cubic feet each) containing the quotation slips for the letters L to Z (about 400,000 of them). In 1955 I received the rest of the collections and several hundreds of books on Older Scots, which he had collected for the work of the Dictionary.

To work with Craigie was quite a privilege for he was one of the most distinguished living philologists and perhaps the greatest living lexicographer at the time. He had been the third of the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) and had himself edited one fifth of the

⁵ The final volume, vol. XII, was completed, though without sent-on material intended for a Supplement, in 2002.

total of over 15,000 pages. The founder-editor of the OED, James Murray, another Scotsman, who had started work on it in 1879, personally edited nearly half of the entire work, so it came about that nearly 70% of the greatest ever dictionary of English was edited by two Scotsmen.⁶

Murray, who was arguably the greatest lexicographer who ever lived, also had an Edinburgh University connection, for his first honorary degree, which he received in 1872 and of which he was inordinately proud, was an Edinburgh University LLD.

Because Craigie learned his lexicography from Murray and I learned mine from Craigie, I used to boast that I was the only living lexicographer in apostolic succession from the great Sir James Murray.

As well as the editor of the OED, Craigie had also been the chief editor of the four-volume *Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles* (DAE) and he also compiled a vast collection of Icelandic romance poetry, and something like 150 other books and articles on various languages. For he was, of course, staggeringly erudite. Once when I visited him, he was in process of selling his large collection of Anglo-Saxon books, a good many hundreds of them, to Trinity College, Dublin, I believe. He was not at all well-off financially. When I expressed surprise that he was giving up his books on Anglo-Saxon, “Well,” he said, “Aitken, I know Anglo-Saxon.”

His favourite language was Icelandic. As well as being a leading authority on English and Scots, in his day he was regarded as *the* leading authority on Icelandic, and although he only paid in all four visits to Iceland he kept up his capacity to speak the language and on his last visit, in 1950, when he was 83, he delivered a very well attended public lecture in Icelandic in the University of Iceland. When I visited Iceland in 1951 every Icelander I met, including farming folk from the far north-east, knew of Craigie or ‘Rímna Craigie’, Craigie of the Rímur (the Rímur were the romance poems he specialised in).⁷ Another of his interests was Frisian and he used to compare the Scots unfavourably with the Frisians, for the Frisians had kept alive their language whereas the Scots, he believed, were allowing theirs to fall into decline. Though from 1897 till his death in 1957 – i.e. 60 years – he lived in England or America, he never lost his Scottish accent and he was all his life a linguistic nationalist and an enthusiast for the Scots language and its revival, unlike Sir James Murray, who held that Scots was merely an important component of the Northern dialect of English.

Craigie had what you might call a pawky sense of humour, and a great fund of funny stories which he always told as if they had happened to him personally. One was the story of the new minister and the Gadarene swine, which is too long for me to tell now, but which Craigie told me as something that he himself witnessed when he was a student at St Andrews. However, I happened to know that the story appeared in Dean Ramsay’s *Reminiscences*, which was published 17 years before Craigie was born.⁸ According to another allegedly

⁶ AJA wrote about Murray in ‘James Murray, master of Scots’ (1996, 2015), as well as reviewing *Sir James A H Murray: A Self-Portrait* in 1958, and contributing an item on Murray to the newspaper series ‘Fly on the wall’ (1994, 2015).

⁷ Editor’s note: ‘Craigie of the *rímur*’ was the title that AJA used in draft for his article published as ‘Quiet Scot who was a master of words’ (1967, 2015).

⁸ The story, as told in Dean Ramsay’s *Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character* (Ramsay, 1861: ch. 1), is as follows:

Among the many superstitious notions and customs prevalent among the lower orders of the fishing towns on the East Coast of Fife, till very recently, that class entertained a great horror of swine, and even at the very mention of the word. If that animal crossed their path when about to set out on a sea voyage, they considered it so unlucky an omen that they would not venture off. A clergyman of one of these fishing villages having mentioned this superstition to a clerical friend, and finding that he was rather incredulous on the subject, in order to convince him told him he would allow him an opportunity of testing the truth of it by allowing him to preach for him the

autobiographical story, he had given a lecture in London on Scots and the Scots character, and after the lecture one of the audience came up to him, shook his hand and said in a broad Scots accent, “Man, we’re a grand people,” to which Craigie replied, “Yes, but I suppose we’ve our faults like other folk.” “No worth mentioning, sir, no worth mentioning,” came the reply.

Craigie liked to look out for the rare flashes of humour in his dictionaries. A favourite was a quotation illustrating the word *damn* n. in *The Oxford English Dictionary*:

Behold the happy moron,
He doesn’t give a damn,
I wish I were a moron,
My God, perhaps I am.

“There’s too little of that kind of thing in the Dictionary,” said Craigie.

In his dictionary editing he confined himself to what he called established facts. He held that it was the dictionary editor’s job to set these out as clearly as possible but to leave to others what he called “mere speculation, Aitken, mere speculation”. He had a reputation for instant problem-solving in his dictionary work or whatever else he was doing. It was said of him that the facts seemed to run round and rattle in his head like dried peas, then suddenly form a convincing pattern, and the pattern was the solution. Despite this fixation for facts, his public lectures are lucid, interestingly exemplified and very readable.

Physically he was a little man, not much over five feet, with black hair and a trim black beard in his youth. He used to claim he was the last of the Picts. He came from Dundee, the heart of Pictish territory and traditionally the Picts were small round-headed people.

Lady Craigie had died some years before I met Craigie, so I never met her. By all accounts she was a formidable person and persistently Scotch. Among many other things, she is remembered for expostulating with a group of Icelanders in Reykjavik in 1910 that they were scandalously wasting the free hot water supply they had all around them, and why did they not harness it to heat their houses. In fact they did so ten years later. Another story I heard of her was of how she berated a butcher in Chicago for not understanding her when she asked him for a gigot of mutton.

When I began work in autumn 1948 as Craigie’s assistant, for the first year I worked from my room in my digs and from the National Library of Scotland, then in the basement of what is now the Library, where a friend of Craigie’s who was then one of the Keepers provided me with a revolving bookcase and a supply of the books I needed for consultation.⁹ Then in the summer of 1949, thanks to the good offices of Angus McIntosh, the new Professor of English Language, and of Charles Stewart, the University Secretary, I was provided with a room in the basement of Minto House in Chambers Street, which was then, as it had been in Dover Wilson’s time, home of the the English departments.

This brought me into the centre of a number of epoch-making events in the history of English and especially Scots language studies in Edinburgh. My new office was next-door to

following day. It was arranged that his friend was to read the chapter relating to the herd of swine into which the evil spirits were cast. Accordingly, when the first verse was read in which the unclean beast was mentioned, a slight commotion was observable among the audience, each one of them putting his or her hand on any near piece of iron – a nail on the seat or bookboard, or to the nails on their shoes. At the repetition of the word again and again, more commotion was visible, and the words “cauld airn” (cold iron), the antidote to this baneful spell, were heard issuing from various corners of the church. And finally, on his coming over the hated word again, when the whole herd ran violently down the bank into the sea, the alarmed parishioners, irritated beyond bounds, rose and all left the church in bodies.

⁹ This end of this sentence, from “where a friend” is scored out in the manuscript.

the then incipient Linguistic Survey of Scotland (Scots Section) and it was the only home there was for the embryonic School of Scottish Studies. So from time to time I would receive visits from Hamish Henderson and Calum Maclean, who were operating as freelance fieldworkers on behalf of the School of Scottish Studies. I got involved in a limited way in both of these projects.¹⁰ I made the first collections for the School of Scottish Studies library as well as a Dictionary Library – both of these are now very large departmental libraries.¹¹ And I got to know many of the original so-called source singers that Hamish Henderson was discovering at the time, including the legendary Jeannie Robertson and Jimmy MacBeath.

Then about this time Angus McIntosh wanted me to deliver two series of lectures in his department, one on Medieval Scots and one on Scots in general. I like to think this was an important event too, because it was the first time ever that the whole history of Scots and Scottish English, from the early beginnings down to the present day, had been taught as a university subject, or indeed at all. This was followed some years later by similar courses given in Aberdeen and then Glasgow, but for a time Edinburgh was alone in this, and has, I believe, remained in the lead ever since.

However, the event of 1949 I primarily want to talk about is the creation of a new Phonetics Department, which with its lecture room and laboratory and offices occupied most of the basement of Minto House where my own office also was. This followed the appointment of Edinburgh's first ever Lecturer in Phonetics, whose name was David Abercrombie. And he is my final topic tonight.

Abercrombie's father was the poet Lascelles Abercrombie, and one of his childhood friends was Rupert Brookes. He studied under all the famous phoneticians of the early part of the century and went on to become one of the most distinguished phoneticians of his own time. The Edinburgh department he built up into one of the most famous in the world and many of today's leading phoneticians were his pupils.

In 1949–50 he gave his first ever Edinburgh class in phonetics, along with his assistant, Mrs Elizabeth Uldall, who still lives in Edinburgh.¹² This was a sort of trial run, and the students were friends and colleagues, of whom I was one. One quite minor event in the course of the class was the discovery of the hitherto unknown unique Scots vowel, sometimes called 'Abercrombie's vowel' and sometimes 'Aitken's vowel' – we both shared in its discovery. This is the vowel, unique to Scottish English among English varieties, which we get in Scottish pronunciation in words like *devil*, *never*, *next*, *shepherd*, *earth* and a score more of words.

Everyone who was taught by Abercrombie agreed that he was a superb teacher. His lectures were always carefully prepared and extremely lucid, delivered from a small notebook such as I am using now, in Abercrombie's clear articulation. One of his special interests was speech rhythm. I will not take the time to develop the linguistic theory of speech rhythm with which Abercrombie's name was and is associated, except to say that it has implications for verse – metrics was another special interest of Abercrombie's.

He strongly advocated the theory that there are, in the matter of rhythm, two classes of language, stress-timed languages such as English and syllable-timed languages such as French. I'm sorry I haven't left myself time to elaborate on this and explain it any further except to say that this theory has implications for verse metrics.¹³

One of his illustrations of this was the line we considered before, "Making the green one red." As I read that it has three stresses:

¹⁰ On AJA's involvement in the Linguistic Survey, see the Introduction to 'Sources of the vocabulary of Older Scots' ([1954], 2015) in the present edition.

¹¹ This sentence is scored out in the manuscript.

¹² Elizabeth Uldall, known as Betsy, died in 2004, aged 90.

¹³ This paragraph is scored out in the manuscript.

/ / /
Making the green one red.

But the other version:

/ / / / / /
Making the green ^ one red

actually has *five* stresses including what Abercrombie called a silent stress after ‘green’ – and this in fact is metrically more regular, so that was probably what Shakespeare intended.

But the aspect of Abercrombie’s work which most interested and most influenced me was his talking and writing about English accents. Abercrombie believed there were in England two kinds of accent – on the one hand the top people’s accent known as Received Pronunciation or RP, which incidentally he spoke himself, and, on the other hand, all the rest. He believed that the privileges conferred by possessing an RP accent were unfair and he exposed the fallacies in the sometimes self-interested arguments that were put forward to justify this state of affairs, and even coined a term for this, the ‘accent-bar’, on the analogy of ‘colour-bar’. Here are two quotations from a broadcast talk he gave in 1951 on this subject.¹⁴

You notice he speaks specifically of England. This is because at the time he believed that Scottish and American and other accents of English outside England were not disadvantaged to the same extent as the non-RP accents of England, though later I persuaded him to modify this view as concerns Scottish English at least. The power structures of British society today are, I believe, much more democratic than when Abercrombie propounded these ideas and a much broader range of people speaking a much wider variety of accents are now in

¹⁴ AJA here refers to ‘p.13, p.15’. A note on the inside cover of one of the notebooks lists ‘R P and Local Accent’ as one of the items to be taken to the lecture, so the reference is presumably to this paper (Abercrombie, 1971). The other items listed are “Craigie pictures, Schram picture, Abercrombie obituary”. On the pages referred to, Abercrombie writes (amongst other things):

The existence of R.P. gives accent judgements a peculiar importance in England, and perhaps makes the English more sensitive than most people to accent differences. In England, Standard English speakers are divided by an ‘accent-bar’, on one side of which is R.P., and on the other side all the other accents. And very often the first judgement made on a stranger’s speech is the answer to the question: which side of the accent-bar is he? Though, needless to say, the question is never formulated explicitly.

It is not easy to put into words how this accent-bar works. There is no doubt that R.P. is a privileged accent; your social life, or your career, or both, may be affected by whether you possess it or do not. Generalization, though, is difficult. Some callings attach more importance to it than others; some social circles are more linguistically exclusive than others; and there are always people of exceptional personality who are able to compensate for any type of accent. Still, I believe it is not putting it too strongly to say that in all occupations for which an educated person is required, it is an advantage to speak R.P., and it may be a disadvantage not to speak it. (p. 13)

All over the world people are intolerant of each other’s accents: unfamiliar customs seem as silly and wrong in speech as they do in everything else. But the exceptional accent-bar of England gives this natural human intolerance an exceptional importance. I believe that the continued existence of this accent-bar, which no longer reflects social reality, is having a harmful effect on Standard English speech in England. As a consequence of it more and more people who are well educated, but have not had an opportunity to learn R.P., are made nervous and anxious about their speech-sounds. Lack of confidence in one’s accent focuses attention on the mechanics of talking, which should be automatic. Preoccupation with how one is speaking can upset the whole of one’s delivery, produce unpleasant voice-quality, destroy self-confidence, even perhaps interfere with thinking.

... It is very difficult to believe, if you talk R.P. yourself, that it is not intrinsically superior to other accents. Until all regional educated accents are genuinely felt in England to be socially equal with R.P., these consequences of the accent-bar will persist. (p. 15)

influential positions, so that RP no longer rules the roost to anything like the extent it did in the early 1950s. But at that time Abercrombie's arguments were the highly pertinent and very first steps in a progress towards greater liberalisation of attitudes to accents, which began, I believe, amongst Edinburgh linguists in the 1950s.

Certainly these ideas greatly influenced me and confirmed me in my own credo of linguistic egalitarianism: that is, the conviction that all natural dialects and accents are equally valid and valuable, and potentially equally efficient, and this very much includes stigmatised dialects like Broad Cockney or 'Gutter Glasgow'. Surprising as it may now seem, these ideas were regarded, even among linguists, as advanced or controversial. One practical outcome of Abercrombie's ideas about accents was that through the 1950s Abercrombie and I, with the support of a few others including the poet Hamish Henderson, conducted a kind of running feud with the BBC in Scotland in the shape of letters to the press and interviews with BBC officials, to try and persuade them to engage announcers and presenters with a much wider range of accents than those of the exclusively RP-speaking group they then employed. Our rationale for this was that the BBC ought to speak the language of the nation it was addressing, and for Scotland, we asserted, the principal national language was Scottish English.¹⁵

From the beginning Abercrombie taught phonetics through whatever accent the student himself or herself possessed, which was often, in Edinburgh, a Scottish accent. At the time this was unorthodox. Other British schools of phonetics and departments of English Language taught invariably through RP, as did, I regret to say, the Edinburgh English Language Department in which I taught myself, till I took over the elementary phonetics lectures in the 1970s.

Abercrombie wrote, based on his lectures, a classic account of Scottish English (Abercrombie, 1979, 1991), and he was given to pointing out, as he did in that paper, that Scottish English had a number of advantages over RP as a target variety for foreign learners of English, because, among several other reasons, it conforms very well to what he called 'Standard Average European' pronunciation, whereas RP and other accents of England are very aberrant from European norms. Of course I very much went along with all these ideas.

Obviously there is a lot more to say about Abercrombie, who, incidentally, was an extraordinarily attractive, amusing, generous and hospitable person, as was and is his wife Mary, who survives him.¹⁶

So, you see, each of the five people I have described provided for me, in their several different directions, some knowledge and some inspiration, during my early years at Edinburgh University as Playboy of the West Germanic World.

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¹⁵ For some published letters of AJA on this topic, see 'Letters to *The Scotsman* on the subject of accent' ([1956–1977], 2015) in the present edition.

¹⁶ Mary Abercrombie died on 28 April 1998, aged 89. I am indebted to her daughter, Mrs Mary Brown, for this information.

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