

**A HISTORY OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF  
ABERDEEN: 1495-1895**

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A history of the University of Aberdeen: 1495-1895 by John Malcolm Bulloch

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## PREFACE.

THIS History has been written apropos of the four hundredth anniversary of the foundation of a University in Aberdeen. My aim has been to sketch the causes and the effects of the educational transitions through which the University has passed, and the varying conditions of the community to which it has had to minister. Biographical details of the professoriate or the alumni, except in so far as they have affected the teaching function of the University, have been strictly excluded. To Mr. P. J. Anderson, the Librarian of the University, who suggested the work to me, and who has furthered its achievement in every possible manner, my warmest thanks are due.

J. M. B.

LONDON, *October*, 1895.

## I. THE SUBJECT IN BRIEF.

THE story of the rise and progress of the University of Aberdeen forms a peculiarly interesting chapter in the annals of the academic world, studied either by itself or as an integral part of the great educational system in which it has figured for 400 years. In the history of the North of Scotland it has, of course, special importance, as a distinct factor in the making of the people and their prosperity; in the history of Universities in general, it presents several aspects of rare interest. The first point is obvious; the second involves a preliminary explanation.

The University stands apart from other Universities in having retained in greater measure some of the mediæval academic principles on which it was founded. Much of its history consists in the struggle to adapt those conditions to the genius of the country in which it is situated, and to the different stages of progress through which the people have passed. Among British Universities it holds a unique position, from the fact that it was the first University in this country to establish a Faculty of Medicine, for it started life with all the Faculties complete. This ideal has not, it is

true, been continuously realised. The University in actual practice was, until last century, chiefly a school of philosophy; yet the theoretic provision for the teaching of Medicine and Law is none the less interesting, historically.

Last of all, the University has a peculiar interest when studied as a typical example of an academic corporation. As at present constituted, the University, representing King's College in Old Aberdeen and Marischal College in New Aberdeen, is a combination of two separate Universities; that is to say, of two distinct degree-granting bodies, created by antagonistic forces. There was the "University and King's College," founded in 1494-5 by William Elphinstone, Bishop of Aberdeen, and "Marischal College and University," founded in 1593 by George, fifth Earl Marischal. The mere names of the founders—the one a churchman, the other a representative member of the titled landlord laity—indicate the rival conditions under which the Universities arose; for the Church found a persistent opponent in the nobility, who ultimately managed to crush it in the name of Protestantism. The necessity for the two creations soon disappeared, but the two corporations continued their work for over 250 years, on almost identical lines, within a mile of one another. Thus it was that Aberdeen possessed two separate Universities, a unique distinction in this country; while England itself could boast of no more. It was only natural that rivalry, which was not very

inspiring, and wrangles, which were no help to education, should mark the whole course of their history.

Thus the evolution of the University, as we know it, has consisted in the adaptation of a mediæval constitution to the requirements of the modern world; and this problem, difficult enough in itself, has been complicated, as nowhere else in the kingdom, by the purely local struggle of two separate corporations, working for the most part on the same educational lines.



## II. THE NORTH OF SCOTLAND BEFORE THE UNIVERSITY.

THE foundation of a University in Aberdeen was altogether remarkable, alike for the daring which inspired the conception, and for the liberal scale on which it was carried out. It was daring because the North of Scotland did not cry out for such an advanced form of education; the University, in fact, came into existence not so much to supply, as to create, a demand for knowledge. It was liberal, inasmuch as the institution was modelled, not on the basis which would have met the immediate wants of the district which it was to serve, but on the lines of the famous Universities of mediæval Europe, which were ministering to the most highly cultivated centres of civilisation.

Before the University arose, the North of Scotland had scarcely had a chance to do more than clear the ground for civilisation to operate. A perpetual state of warfare kept the people so busily occupied that anything approaching education, as we know it, was an undreamt-of, almost an undesired, luxury, except in one or two of the large towns, where combination rendered the struggle for bare existence somewhat less difficult than in the

open country. In the three great national struggles—the civil war of succession, the invasion from England, and the threatened domination of the wild Celt—Aberdeenshire was forced to take its full share.

Such elements of progress as there were came in large measure from the Church, which for a century prior to the creation of the University wielded extraordinary power in the State. Buckle, indeed, has asserted, in his dogmatic fashion, that during the fifteenth century the clergy had more influence in Scotland than in any other country in Europe, Spain alone excepted. St. Columba had introduced Christianity into the country during the sixth century, and had sent his disciples north and south and east and west. In Aberdeenshire they had established themselves at Deer, where a great abbey flourished. Farther south, there was the powerful Abbey of Arbroath, familiarised by Southey's ballad of its pious abbot. The seat of the ecclesiastical government of the North was Mortlach, in Banffshire, where a holy house is said to have been founded half a century before the Conqueror came. It was not until the capital of the See was transferred to Aberdeen, probably during the twelfth century, that the town became a place of importance, although tradition bids us believe that St. Machar planted the seeds of Christianity there as early as 570 A.D. The choice of Aberdeen as the capital showed the wisdom of the Church, for no other place on the northern coasts was so well

adapted to become a commercial centre. Religious orders sprang up in the town in rapid succession. William the Lion brought the Trinity Friars, his son introduced the Black Friars, and David II. installed the Carmelites. The Knights Templar early established a hospital (the charter of which was carried off by Edward I.), and in 1471 a monastery for the Grey Friars was founded. St. Machar Cathedral was begun in 1357, and the church of St. Nicholas in 1467.

Aberdeen, like the rest of the country, owed a great deal to the Church from the point of view of mere material progress. The town, probably from time immemorial, had been a fishing port, and the industry has grown year by year, till it has assumed the enormous proportions of to-day. In the twelfth century, William the Lion had granted a charter confirming the rights of the citizens to trade, and a form of municipal government had been long established, for the burgh possessed a provost as early as 1272. But, after all, the town was distinctly primitive. The private houses were merely wooden structures, and this accounts for the fires which frequently reduced the place to ashes. In all the great public works it was the Church and not the municipality that showed spirit. For instance, it was left to the Church to bridge the two rivers, the famous Brig of Balgownie having been built by Bishop Cheyne in Robert Bruce's reign, and the more elaborate and historic Bridge of Dee by Bishops Elphinstone and Dunbar.