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Coming Events

Wednesday 21 October 2015: the Civic Society's **Annual Awards Ceremony** at the Town & County Hall at 7.30 for 8pm.

Wednesday 25 November 2015: Building a 21st Century Architectural Heritage – a talk by Professor David McClean, Head of School, The Scott Sutherland School of Architecture & Built Environment, RGU. At the Royal Northern & University Club, No. 9 Albyn Place, at 7:30 for 8 pm.

Aberdeen's Union Terrace Garden: *War and Peace in the Denburn Valley*

Contributed by Diane Morgan

The complete and dramatic story of Union Terrace Gardens has never before been told in a single volume. Now, in her eleventh book on Aberdeen, Diane Morgan tells the complete history of these iconic Gardens on the west side of the former Denburn Ravine.

From its early days as the Denburn Meadows, where sheep were corralled at the time of the nearby Woolmanhill sales, to the transformation of the Meadows into the Great Bleachery, which played a crucial role in Aberdeen's industrial revolution, this site has been central to the history and development of the city. And above the Meadows rose the wooded Corbie Heugh, the 'crow cliff' where Johnnie Cope and his Redcoats were encamped in 1745, prior to their disaster at Prestonpans.

By the 1860s the area was in decline and being taken over for housing when the architect and future provost, James Matthews, overcame the faintheartedness and intransigence of his fellow councillors and, from the Heuch and the meadows below,

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created the Union Terrace Gardens we know today. Since then, Union Terrace Gardens has survived various attempts to raise and convert it, all of which have failed, including Sir Ian Wood's City Garden Project (2008-12) which caused immense controversy in Aberdeen. This latest dramatic episode and the bitter and divisive struggle it gave rise to is described and reviewed in full.

Along with an in-depth look at the handsome architecture of Union Terrace, and at the east side of the Denburn Valley, where the fate of Archibald Simpson's Triple Kirks has been sealed, *Aberdeen's Union Terrace Gardens*, with its authoritative text (including a crucial chapter by Mike Shepherd) and superb photography, is both a fascinating account of this important green public space and an indispensable addition to the written history of the city of Aberdeen. An extract follows:

John Gray: An Ideal Benefactor

Given the present anger over the unpopular refurbishment of Aberdeen Art Gallery, it might be of interest to look at the magnificent frontage in Schoolhill which the Gallery shares with the arched entrance to Robert Gordon's College and with the former Gray's School of Art, to find out how they came to be there, and hope that they at least will come to no harm.

John Gray (1811-1891) founder of famous School of Art, (originally the School of Art and Science), these days a part of the Robert Gordon University, was one of Aberdeen's greatest benefactors. Born in Cuminestown in 1811, the son of a carpenter and millwright, Gray learnt the elements of his father's trade as a young lad, came to Aberdeen to seek his fortune. He found part-time employment at the firm of William Mackinnon & Co, ironfounders of Spring Garden. The Mackinnons, impressed by Gray's commitment and skill, offered him full time employment in the pattern shop. In time he became a partner, then head of the firm. He was over fifty by that time, homely, unpretentious and speaking his native Doric as most people still did. He was an excellent businessman and in the course of his career did much to expand the range of Mackinnon's work, but he did not care greatly for public life. Though a town councillor from 1869-72 and again from 1880-88, he was a reluctant Master of the Guild Brethren's Hospital and Convener of the Water Committee, and would not on any account, be persuaded to become a baillie. But an earlier appointment, in 1859, as a director of the Aberdeen Mechanics Institute, was one

after his own heart. As a youth he had been frustrated by his lack of technical training and doubtless wished he could have attended such a place. The Institute had a library which Gray regarded of prime importance, and was also developing an educational programme and organising local art classes, but the building was cramped and dated. Gray felt it would desirable to have a specific building dedicated to the teaching of Science and Art.

He had his site earmarked, in Schoolhill beside the proposed Art Gallery, and seized the initiative. The ground was on the east side of the Robert Gordon's College entrance, the very spot where Lord Byron's old Grammar School still stood. Gray wrote to the Lord Provost, Peter Esslemont, who was also President of the Governors of the fledgling Robert Gordon's College (it ceased to be Robert Gordon's Hospital in 1881) proposing 'to erect at my own cost - around £5000 - on said site a School for Science and Art for behoof of the community of Aberdeen, in harmony with the design of the Art Gallery, according to the accompanying plan prepared by Messrs Matthews and Mackenzie, Architects. On this plan.' he continued, will be observed that an arched Gateway is shown connecting the Art Gallery and the proposed School. This is part of the scheme I should like to see carried out, (ie for his own School) but it appears to me that it falls more properly to be taken up by the Governors of Robert Gordon's College and either by themselves or in conjunction with the Art Gallery Committee.' He was far from pushy, adopting a gently-gently approach, but he knew what exactly he wanted, and his proposals were adopted. The old Grammar came down and Gray bears responsibility and credit for the creation of the famous and irreplaceable triptych-style pink granite façade.

There were other benefactions too, apart from Schoolhill. As a great believer in the concept of free public libraries Gray was instrumental in persuading the Dunfermline-born tycoon, Andrew Carnegie of Pittsburgh, an outstanding benefactor of public libraries to donate liberally to the new Aberdeen Public Library as he had done himself. He had hoped to have the Library built on the site opposite Gordon's College where the Central School (now the 'Academy' mall) eventually went up, which would have allowed him to give even architectural greater unity to the area. He was unsuccessful however and settled for the new embankment at Rosemount Viaduct, opposite the north end of Union Terrace The library, which opened in 1891, had a total cost of over £10,000.

Gray was also a member of the kirk session of the South Free, the smallest of the Triple Kirks, which had a well-off and growing congregation. He set in motion its exodus from the Denburn Valley. He gave £3,000 towards the erection of a new roomier, church next to his new Public Library at Rosemount Viaduct. It had become quite a fashion for new churches to be built in the west end, the West Free on the corner of Union Street and Bon Accord Street was a good example, as was the magnificent Carden Place United Free, 'the Cathedral Church of the United Presbyterians', whose congregation moved west from a simple warehouse style building in George Street. Gray made it a condition of his contribution that the new South Free should be in the same locality as the old. And so it was. The new South Free (now St Mark's) was a stone's throw from the Triple Kirks.

Sadly Gray, died in 1891, by then a widower. He did not live to see the opening of his South Free that same year, nor the Library's opening ceremony by Andrew Carnegie whom Gray had earlier persuaded to come to Aberdeen to inaugurate it when complete.

If our famous statues provide a unique periphery for Union Terrace Gardens, Gray's fine buildings in Schoolhill and Rosemount form an addition stratum. He chose the city's leading architects to design them – Marshall Mackenzie at Schoolhill and at the South Free, George Watt at the Public Library. These buildings contribute magnificently to the unique ambience of the area. He was an ideal benefactor.

Footnote: I have a special interest in John Gray who resided in a double villa in Aberdeen's Waverley Place, which was roughly opposite my old home. By an interesting coincidence, the double villa caught the eye of the flamboyant Aberdeen businessman, Tommy Scott Sutherland, in the late 1950s. He converted it into the headquarters of his business empire, Waverley House Later still, it became the Prince Regent Hotel.

The Scott Sutherland School of Architecture, founded by Tommy, based in his own former home, Garthdee House, and the innovative Gray's School of Art designed by Michael Shewan were two of the earliest 'settlers' at what is now the Garthdee campus of the Robert Gordon University. Henry Bain Smith's neat and elegant bust of the founder will greet you at the entrance to Gray's.