

# Gordon Craigie

*This month, I'm in conversation with Ally Heather –  
historian, writer, presenter, producer,  
Scots language activist and independista...*

THERE'S AN old saying, or cliché if you're being cynical – *when life gives you lemons, make lemonade!* – which basically advises us to make the most of what we have to hand. If you're a young boy growing up in rural Angus, about to leave school with no qualifications, looking for a meaningful career path during the economic clusterbouchach caused by the 2008 financial crisis you might well be inclined to think, "I'm gonnæ need mair lemons!" Fortunately, for all the causes he holds dear, Ally Heather had an entire orchard available, even if it took him a wee while to realise it – in his case, mind, his fruit of choice would turn out to be kiwi and tangerine, but more of that later! That's enough of the fruit-related puns for now – the auld Scots saying, *whit's for ye'll no go by ye*, would also be appropriate to explain his story.

Given what we'll discover was a less-than-promising outlook when he left school, Ally's roadmap to where he is today – historian, writer, presenter, producer, Scots language activist and independista – has taken a roundabout route, including locations such as New Zealand, Switzerland and... Newbigging? When we caught up recently in Dundee – as twa local loons, baith born in Dundee and brocht up in

*A roundabout route, including locations such as New Zealand, Switzerland and... Newbigging?*

an aroond Carnoustie – we immediately did that typical Scottish code-switching language thing as Ally laughingly responded to my initial globetrotting query: "Aye, aa the big centres!" I'm fae Newbigging, but I spent the first year o my life in Carnoustie. Baith my grandparents stayed there, they were fae Kilbarchan and the Gorbals but had flitted ower tae the East Coast 'cause ane wis Protestant and ane wis Catholic and that jist didnae work in thae days. my grandad's brither, Pat Coogan, played for Celtic and my grannie's family were, mebbe no fully accepting, so they came ower tae the mair tolerant east and set up shop in Carnoustie.

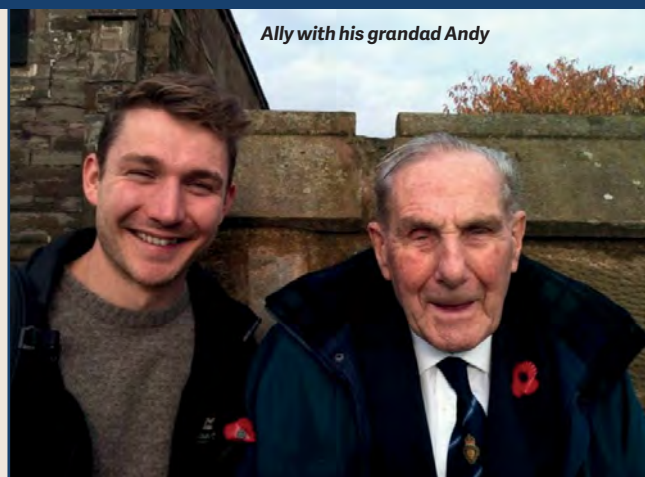


Ally Heather



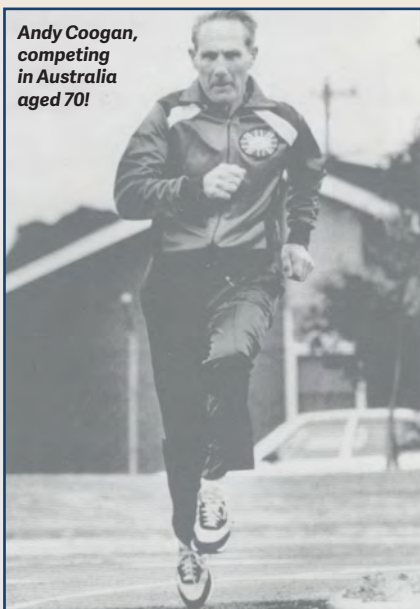
# An independent mind...

Ally is clearly very fond and proud of his grandad, Andy Coogan, and rightly so. Andy was a familiar face in Carnoustie while I was growing up as he ran the local athletics club. My memory of him is of a very slight, wiry man – with a steely gaze behind his kindly eyes – cycling around Carnoustie wearing his old-style burgundy tracksuit en route to guiding successive generations of kids into athletics. His own athletic prowess saw him finish second behind the then world mile record holder in 1940, and he was regarded as a serious contender for an Olympic medal if the Second World War had not intervened. But perhaps my memory of a steely gaze is most likely explained by Andy's experience as a prisoner of war, which he wrote about in his 2012 memoir *Tomorrow You Die*. The book's synopsis gives this overview:



Ally with his grandad Andy

Andy Coogan, competing in Australia aged 70!



*Andy Coogan was born in Glasgow in 1917, the oldest child of poor Irish immigrants. He was tipped for Olympic glory, but a promising running career was interrupted by war service. His capture during the fall of Singapore marked the beginning of a three-and-a-half-year nightmare of starvation, torture and disease. Andy was imprisoned in the notorious Changi camp before being transported to Taiwan, where he worked as a slave in a copper mine and was twice ordered to dig his own grave. He was later taken to Japan on a hell-ship voyage that nearly killed him, but Andy's athleticism and spirit enabled him to survive an ordeal in which many died.*

Andy Coogan ran competitively well into his 80s and continued coaching into his 90s. He passed away in 2017, only 12 days short of his 100th birthday.



"So, I grew up in Newbigging but circulated in Carnoustie, went tae High School there, but my faither wis fae New Zealand, so I had dual nationality, and because o the All Blacks and a that sort o stuff, I grew up playing rugby for Forfar Colts and Carnoustie and playing football jist in the park at Newbigging. Fae there? I left school in aboot 2007 and there wis jist really nae

*He passed away in 2017, only 12 days short of his 100th birthday*

opportunities about Dundee. I got a job in a call centre – a horrendous place to work – pishin rain against the big windaes and haein loads o phone conversations ye jist dinnae want tae be haein, so I used the passport tae get oot!

"I got a job labouring in London for a bit to get some savings together then fled ower tae New Zealand. I worked on building sites and the like ower there, and travelled around a lot jist 'cause there wis nae reason no tae – it wisnae like I wis missing oot on a career or onything! So I lived in New Zealand and Australia, France, the Republic o Georgia for a while and travelled a lot in eastern Europe – I'm jist really interested in that hale pairt o the world. But, if ye're 23/24 in Scotland, the Scottish Government can gie ye a bit o a 'bye' intae uni – a 'dae something wi yer life' opportunity. So I got intae Aberdeen uni tae dae a History (with Gaelic and French) degree, and that jist changed my life. That then gied me the chance tae stud in Switzerland for a year, then I got loads o work there so I kept on flying back and forth atween Aberdeen and Geneva. I did a lot o media work through a that time and jist gathered mair and mair momentum, and when I finished uni I started my career as it is – such as it is!

"Switzerland's beautiful. I'd always slightly fantasised about French culture – being fae Newbigging it's like the nearest exotic place! – so the idea o getting tae speak French for a year, 'cause aa my studies were in French, jist felt cool so I love Geneva for that. Afore that mind, I'd had a year at Victoria University in Wellington, but the tricky thing wis that I didnae want tae get intae debt, and uni's no free there, so I tried tae work the hail time – I wis daein a full-time uni course while also working 40 hours a week and jist burning the caunle at three ends! I wis completely burnt oot, couldnae keep it going for the hail degree, so I dropped oot. I'd been studying Soviet history there and that's why I flitted tae Georgia, 'cause that's whaur Stalin's fae, and I worked, part-time, teaching English and a bit o farming. I jist couldnae have kept the pace up tae dae uni in New Zealand, and if I wisnae daein that there wisnae too much reason tae stay and the Georgia opportunity wis something I'd been dead keen tae dae anyway. So that wis a dead-end attempt at uni, but it meant that when I came back to Scotland I wis mair appreciative o the opportunity. And, ken, floatin about uni getting tae think things an read books when ye've been grafting for fower years feels like a holiday!"

Given that Ally graduated from the University of Aberdeen with a First-class Honours degree in History with French and Gaelic, I wondered where his interest in Soviet history had come from when he was in New Zealand, and why he hadn't continued with that when he returned to Scotland? "Interesting question, I'm no a hunner percent sure, part o it is jist bein dead



*Ally graduated from the University of Aberdeen with a First-class Honours degree in History with French and Gaelic*

young and haein a bit o a fantasy – I was born in 1989 jist as the Berlin Wall wis comin doon an jist as the hale Soviet Union wis collapsing, and this has left a huge imprint on abody that's aulder than me's lives. In Angus, for example, we had a massive American air force base at Edzell and so friends o my family were connected wi that and there were loads o Americans about the community that'd been associated wi it, and that whole Cold War thing had jist ended when I was comin on the scene so I think there wis a bit o mystique associated wi the Soviets for that.

"There wis also the socialism side o it. I'd been interested, jist fae a local history standpoint, aboot communism and socialism in Scotland. Growing up broke, and I mean broke, in the Angus and Dundee area wis nae joke, and this idea that there wis a worker's revolution that went on, that there was a way oot, sort o, was jist fascinating so I wanted tae ken mair aboot it. Ane o my best pals growing up was Latvian, so the first country I ever went tae wis Latvia, and her parents telt me about the Soviet Union and stuff anecdotally, so I jist wanted tae formalise my education. I would've probably continued wi Soviet studies had that been a specialism ye could dae at Aberdeen. But it wisnae really, the only boy who kent onything aboot the Soviet Union was only interested in the trains o the Soviet Union! He was totally fixated on it – he had a ringtone that wis jist a choo-choo train kinna noise and he was a bit, ken, no the boy tae hing oot wi unless ye wanted tae ken aboot Soviet trains!

"I chose my degree subjects because... I'd hated Dundee when I wis young, 'cause it wis that tremendous sense o, as my pal says, if you're born skint around Dundee you're born f\*\*\*ed! The 2008 financial crash meant nae work, nae opportunities, naebody wanted onything tae dae wi ye. So ye're young wi aa these ideas and aa this energy – I got rejected fae a drystane dyking course at Dundee College! I had a real resentment o feeling thwarted by the environment. So, when I came hame, I made the decision that I had tae find new ways tae interpret whaur I wis – ye cannae jist see Dundee as a doon-on-its-luck post-industrial toon, ye hae tae see it as something mair and see Angus as something mair – and one way tae add layers tae yer appreciation o a place is tae learn aboot the nature, the whisky, the food that's produced there, and tae appreciate aa that. But also tae learn the history, tae add layers tae yer complexity, tae the view o whit ye're takin fae it, tae yer understanding o yer neebours and yer friends and whaur aa yer communities hae come fae and that kinna thing. So I found studying history – Jacobitism, Pictish history, industrialisation, and the experience o Dundee through aa that – helped me appreciate that



Enjoying a freebie from his brother's van?



Heather Street Food vans, outside V&A Dundee, with Chris and Melodie Heather



this place is unique and interesting and that the folk are special, and jist tae love the place, like learning to love the place because it is my hame and there's nae place else in the world that ever will be."

I don't know about you, but I found that last passage to be particularly deep and meaningful, almost poetic, and as good an explanation of why it's important to learn about our history and culture in a way that most of us have been systematically deprived of during our formal education. It resonates with the quote I keep coming back to from Professor Geoffrey Barrow, *to make a nation conscious of its identity you must first give it a history*. I'm also reminded of Billy Kay's story about a Labour minister's answer, in an early devolved parliament, on being asked why Scottish studies, history and language, were not properly addressed in the school curriculum – *I do not see my role as educating a generation of young nationalists!*

But, as with most graduates, immediately after leaving the sheltered cloisters of academe follows the reality of what to do next and, again, Ally has not followed a traditional path of simply "getting a job". Notwithstanding his earlier self-deprecating jibe about "my career, such as it is!", I wondered what had led him to this portfolio career as a historian, writer, presenter, producer, Scots language activist and independista: "Here's a theory I've been toying wi for the last few months. I think the reason I got into daein whit I dae is because o misogyny in rural Angus! Bear wi me... since I was a bairn, being a man in a traditional family that wis dead intae folk music – I've got cousins that're great fiddlers and've toured aa ower the world, we've got bagpipe makers, my grandad sang in a folk band – and we were totally raised in the Scottish traditional sense, which wis great and I'm really happy aboot that. But it is the thing that whenever we had family or pals roond we'd aa hae tae dae a turn. So, as a man, I'd dae a poem, a reading, tell a story or a joke. So fae a dead young age ye're expected tae be oot there daein yer thing, in a way that lassies arenae – lassies tend no tae get speakin roles, they'll dae dances and that kinna thing. At funerals and weddings I'd aye be put forward tae represent the family, so I've been trained,

inculcated, in this cultural norm o public speaking and it was very normal, me being a man, to be pushed intae that position fae a young age.

"So I think that wis basically the cultural training that gied me the sense that that's a normal thing tae dae. I didnae hae tae go tae public speaking classes or onything, I've never particularly felt that I *myself* had much tae say, but I feel that I've aye been able tae represent communities well as a guid communicator. I also loved writing, so when I was in New Zealand I'd write short stories and get them published in wee magazines and stuff, but I was never that guid at fiction – it was always fine but it wisnae 'guid'. Whit I got really guid at wis writing wee travel stories for friends back hame in Scotland and I just got intae the habit o writing thae wee vignettes. I loved it, they loved it, and I won a travel writing competition wi *The Times* which came fae an email hame and somebody saying, 'that's a cracking story, you should get that published'. So I liked writing aboot real stuff, creative non-fiction, and I jist carried on wi it. I wrote some stuff for *Bella Caledonia* around

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Ally the independista!