

as I remember it...

Journalist **Kenny Kemp** recalls history lessons with Tom Devine, an argument with The Clash and some of the brightest minds of a generation

I crossed the great East-West divide to go to university. For me, it was one of the best decisions of my young adult life and I spent five memorable years as an undergraduate at Strathclyde and then as the sabbatical Vice-President of the Students' Union in John Street.

I might have been born in Edinburgh, but Glasgow belonged to me in the late 1970s. I have so many memories of a stimulating, intellectually enriching and entertaining time at Strathclyde. From Freshers' Week, when I heard Student President Stewart McIntosh – now a great friend – and the Principal Sir Samuel Curran encourage us all to grasp our opportunities, through to my final weeks hosting the Students' Union annual dinner with our academic guests, I had one outstanding journey of learning.

I remember stepping into the red sandstone Royal College in George Street with my Dad and we gazed in interest at the huge ship models in their cases. I loved the place from day one: the smell of the disinfectant; the old swimming pool; the cavernous engineering halls; and the pre-lecture chatter in the McCance building.

Bright young things

I came to study geography in the Livingstone Tower, as part of the eclectic first year of Arts and Social Studies along with economic history, politics, geography, economics and philosophy. The great Gavin Kennedy taught us about TANSTAAFL – “There ain't no such thing as a free lunch” – and the Diminishing Law of Marginal Utility, but I soon realised that I enjoyed the



rumbustious politics tutorials where former shipyard shop stewards were pitched against the young Oxbridge lecturers. There was no contest.

Strathclyde was a vibrant debating place where mature students were devouring the words of Marx, Engels, and Tony Benn. There was a young John Boothman, who now heads up the BBC current affairs department in Glasgow, then a livewire of the Labour club; and a fresh-faced Tom Hamilton, now a hard-nosed news editor on the Daily Record; there was Pat Duffy, who heads up the Scottish Licensed Trade News; and people like Tam Baillie, now Children's Commissioner, and Foster Evans, of the housing employees' organisation; debater Tam McTurk, and the effervescent Elish McPhilomy, who is now the Solicitor-General for Scotland, Elish Angiolini. We represented 'the Tech' together at

ABOVE: Kenny Kemp is Scotland's Business Journalist of the Year in the 2010 Scottish Press Awards. He has authored seven books, one of which won WHSmith Business Book of the Year in 2004.

a debating tournament in Liverpool where Charles Kennedy, the former Lib Dem leader, was representing the varsity rivals from Gibson Street. We did well, but he wiped the floor.

In first year I stayed in the Baird Hall of Residence on the top floor and met a whole gang of characters including Colin Sneddon, John Lypka, and Jim McFarlane, a future Union president, Bill Boyes, who went to work in television, and David Irving, who worked hard and gained a first in engineering and works for Babcock Mitsui. I played squash with Ian Brown, one of the first Strathclyde grads to go to the British Film School, and was a substitute for the first XI football team against Glasgow Uni at Cambuslang, when we beat them 1-0. I learned to eat curries when you could have a meal and a few drinks for £2 in the Koh i Noor.

I meet my first shivering Malaysian and Singaporean friends

as they cooked noodles in the depths of winter, and spoke to exiled Iraqis about their regime, and helped run an evening to celebrate Zimbabwe's independence when we lauded Robert Mugabe. I ended up with the renowned historian Tom Devine as my Honours tutor. What brilliant luck. He admired my dissertation on Tobermory, on Mull, as an 18th century planned fishing village, but my editorship of the Strathclyde Telegraph, got in the way of landing a top degree. On the paper, I worked with the erudite French scholar Ian Faller, the annoyingly encyclopaedic Ken Wright, and other Union habitués such as Scott Ferguson, Ken Simon, Alex Sim, Jim Lee, and the lawyer Rod Mackenzie, whom I pipped in the elections for VP in 1979. Among our circle was Susan Hart, now a professor at Strathclyde Business School, and Jim Cameron, who became an East Kilbride councillor.

Of course, the guys outnumbered the ladies, but there were some incredible young female minds who hung around with us, such as my dear friend Jean Roberts (néé Graham) who now lives in Pau and works for Total.

Most lectures that I attended were thought-provoking: among them RM Punnett and Bill Sanderson in politics, and in history there was Professor Butt, the inspirational Tom McAloon, John Hume, American Bill Wurtmann, and Tom Devine. How lucky we were to have Tom in the prime of his academic teaching. It was heads down and note taking for an hour.

The Union

I was elected Vice-President of the Union when Charlie Ross, of the Teapot Party, was elected President. My domain was the Union itself, working with Tom Brown, the Union manager. I signed the contract to have Ind Coope supply us with Skol



Lager, then the biggest beer bar in Scotland. My reward was a slap-up meal in the Buttery, my first-ever posh restaurant.

Punk was taking over – and on Saturday night students started to pogo and gob. Charming. I was in charge the night that Joe Strummer was due to play the Union with The Clash. There were dozens of fans outside the door and Joe confronted me saying the Union was an elitist club and that he wanted his fans to come in. I said that would not be possible, they had to be 18 and signed in by a student. He was rather angry and pointed his finger in my face. “You're a fascist. We're not playing to any of your middle-class scum”. “I'm sorry,” I said. “I don't care what you think. But you've signed a contract and we'll hold you to that.”

They did play and they were brilliant. So were Southside Johnny and the Asbury Dukes, the UK Subs, Bill Nelson's Be Bop Deluxe, The Police, Talking Heads and The Ramones (on the same bill on the same night). The Union was alive. On my watch, there was a terrible tragedy which still haunts me. Squeeze were playing and there were 800 bopping away on the top floor. A young man tragically died after falling over the bannister. We had to stop the gig with Jools

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Holland in full flow and get everyone out down the back stairs. The Glasgow Herald's Monday edition quoted me in an article about the tragedy and I ended up in hot water for talking out of turn to the press.

I went on to become a journalist. Professor John Butt scolded me for not applying myself fully to my studies and, you know, I still regret this all these years later. I was the first Strathclyde graduate on the prestigious Thomson Regional Newspapers Training Scheme, alongside an assortment of Oxbridge, Edinburgh and Aberdeen postgrads. They told me they never had as good a time at university as I did. The University of Strathclyde is simply an amazing place. I live in Edinburgh now and I still rave about my student days in Glasgow. My 17-year-old daughter yawns when I tell her about it – it seems there is still a great divide. ■

ABOVE: Kenny Kemp describes his busy days at Strathclyde as “one outstanding journey of learning”