

The Glasgow School of Art
Oration for Muriel Gray
14 June 2013

Vice Chancellor, Director, at the nomination of The Glasgow School of Art and by the authority of the Senate of The University of Glasgow, I present to you this person on whom the Senate desires you to confer the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters.

Muriel Gray

Most descriptions of MURIEL GRAY open by listing her as a writer, sometimes journalist, author, broadcaster and businesswoman but that summary is little more than a job description. Whilst her sharp wit and opinionated comment often accompany the list it is style rather than substance that is registered. I suggest that Muriel Gray possesses two particular qualities that connect her to the Glasgow School of Art and fuel her significant contribution to our culture.

The first of those qualities is irritability. Here I am not referring to routine annoyance but to a heightened sensitivity to external stimuli that may generate a positive, as well as a negative, response. Indeed, contrary to many descriptions of Muriel Gray, my impression is overwhelmingly of an enthusiast rather than a critic. Her series of programmes 'The first 50 – Munro bagging without a beard' is a wonderful appreciation of the special qualities of Scotland's landscape. Her book to accompany the re-opening of Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery along with her programme on the Glasgow Boys, for BBC2, reveals a deep knowledge and a warmth of expression that can only come from genuine affection.

The second quality is observation. Observation, I would define, is seeing and reflecting on what we see. It can be a place, person, painting, film, book or indeed patterns of behavior. This facility, that we aim to develop in our students, is easily recognizable in the work and the expression of Muriel Gray. Here we might find some of that assault-force invective and

caustic wit when she reflects on her role as a judge for the Orange prize in 2007 with an article titled 'Women authors must drop domestic themes'. Or an earlier missive 'In memory of solipsism' criticizing the proliferation of impromptu monuments in our cities and country.

As with all irritable, observant, enthusiasts there is always a moment when the mental adhesive to reality fails and in this instance the article 'The sexier side of bagpipes' was, perhaps, one such moment.

It should come as no surprise that Muriel Gray has the attributes I have described, as she is a graduate of the Glasgow School of Art and as with many of our graduates she deployed the talents developed as an art student variously. I underline *variety* as both a mark of achievement and a health warning.

She commenced her working life along fairly conventional lines firstly as a professional illustrator and then as assistant head of design in the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh. Then as a member of punk band, The Family Von Trapp she embarked on musical/broadcasting career as an interviewer on the early Channel 4 music show *The Tube* from 1982. For most of us this was the moment when Muriel Gray imprinted herself on our image of popular culture as a young broadcaster with the critical wit and independence to deflate egos and puncture pomposity as well as champion the more challenging and innovative music of the time. Not surprising then that she was a regular on *The Media Show* from 87-89 for the same channel as her credentials now spanned the visual arts, music and broadcasting. She was also, for a while, a DJ and became a regular stand-in presenter on BBC Radio 1 and, most memorably for me, she was the only credible replacement for the late and much lamented John Peel. She also presented regularly on BBC Radio 4 for *Start the week*. As a response, perhaps, to the risk of easy categorization she presented and performed *The Munro Show*, and other programmes including *Ride On*, for Channel 4, *The Design Awards*, for BBC, and *The Booker Prize awards* for Channel 4.

Art Is Dead – Long Live TV. Was a programme that sparked controversy when it was discovered that the featured artists were fictitious. It was interpreted either as a

confirmation of contemporary art's phoniness or as a revelation of the corruption of the art market and the complicity of the media.

Now established as a producer and originator she launched her own production company in 1989, originally named Gallus Besom (*besom* being a term of contempt for a woman and *gallus* bold or cheeky), then renamed to Ideal World in 1993 to form IWC Media.

In 1994 this changed and when Muriel Gray published her first work of fiction *The Trickster* to be followed by *Furnace* in 1996 and *The Ancient* in 2000. Concurrently she was a columnist in many publications including *Time Out* magazine, the *Sunday Correspondent*, the *Sunday Mirror* magazine, and *Bliss* whilst writing a regular column in the *Sunday Herald*. She won Columnist of the Year in the 2001 Scottish press awards.

In her public life Muriel Gray is a former Rector of the University of Edinburgh, the only woman ever to have held this post, and has an honorary Doctorate from the University of Abertay, Dundee. She was the chair of the judges for the 2007 Orange prize for Fiction and a judge of the Robert Burns Humanitarian Award.

Closer to home Muriel Gray was vice chair of the committee selecting the architect for the new building for the Glasgow School of Art. She reflected on her past in the BBC film marking the Mackintosh building centenary and is an active member of the Glasgow School of Art Development Trust raising money for the next stage of the estate development.

It is for her achievements, and her embodiment of those personal and professional qualities, which we hold so dear that we invite you Vice Chancellor to confer the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, on Muriel Gray.