

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 clusterbourach 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.

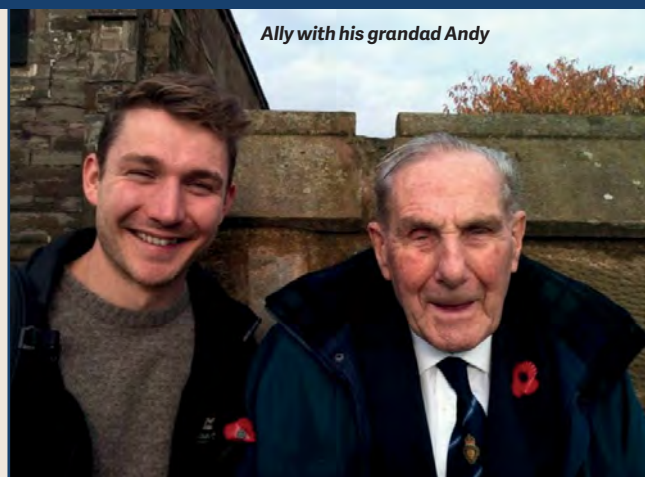


Ally Heather



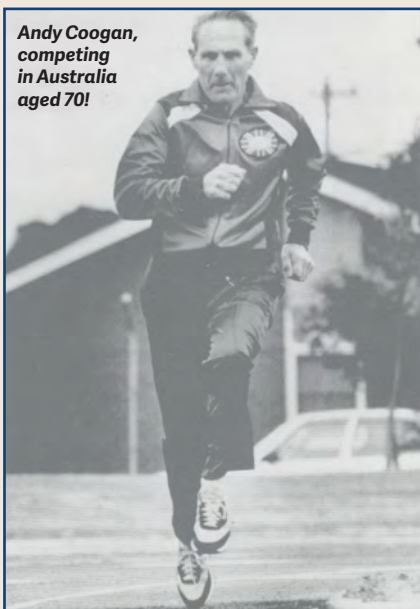
An independent mind...

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 aroond 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 aboot 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



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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 collapsin, 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 dykin 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,

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

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



Ally the independista!



Filming Rebel Tongue at Tannadice with Billy Kay and Gary Robertson

the indy ref and that wis a bit o a trigger tae be honest – I felt a media existed in which the voices o fowk I cared aboot werenae getting heard. I strongly feel this, that north-east voices in general dinnae get heard. Ye so rarely hear, in the national media in ony form, fowk fae Montrose or Elgin or Carnoustie giein a thoughtful insight intae the lived experiences that they hae. And wi the indy ref, I jist didnae see working-class east-coast voices being heard at aa, especially pro-independence anes. Then when I went aff tae uni I signed up wi the student newspaper and that wis my training grund for modern media – podcasts, radio, a wee bit o video, plenty o copywriting – that’s where it aa came fae.”

We’re having this conversation in the ultra-modern hotel above Dundee’s new railway station, part of the 30-year, £1 billion Dundee City Waterfront redevelopment project, which aims to *transform the City of Dundee into a world leading waterfront destination for visitors and businesses through the enhancement of its physical, economic and cultural assets*. The most recognisable of those assets is obviously V&A Dundee, or Scotland’s Design Museum as it should properly be called! If Scotland’s sunniest city hadn’t developed strong winds and an increasing likelihood of rain immediately prior to our meeting, thereby breaking a week-long spell of beautiful warm sunshine, we would have been relaxing outside that iconic building drinking coffee served from one of the equally iconic retro vans located on the plaza. Those vans are the brainchild of Ally’s brother, Chris, who came up with the idea when the pandemic forced his fledgling *Heather Street Food* business to find an alternative to the cancelled festivals, weddings and parties that had previously been their main target customer base. It seemed an original idea in the first place but this rapid change of direction – *when life gives you lemons, make lemonade!* – alongside Ally’s non-traditional career

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path made me wonder if this entrepreneurial spirit had been passed down from his parents?

“No, nothing like that. When Chris wis born and I was conceived, my mum and dad [Jean and Duncan] were actually undocumented migrants in America! Mum came hame pregnant wi me and I was the first o the three o us – [sister Ellie is two years older than Ally] – tae be born in Scotland. Mum’s had a few jobs and Dad’s a mixed bag too, but he worked at a foundry in London while I was growing up in Newbigging. He’d hitchhike fae London tae Edinburgh then catch the train tae Dundee when he was ‘visiting’ us which, on reflection, is fairly cool – if also an indication that we were a bit skint! It’s mair a lack o a career path option, I think. Chris’s only a year aulder than me, and there wis nae careers tae be had in Dundee. Neither o us could get tae uni, we couldnae get intae jobs and progress through the ranks or anything like that, we didnae hae ony qualifications, naebody was takin fowk on at ony level, so we baith jist did loads o hospitality work – that’s whit working-class fowk dae these days, it’s no doon the mines or in the factories or chemical works, it’s in hospitality on the sh**iest wages! It’s the precariat culture. We baith had a total lack o control ower oor lives for aboot ten years and so the only way we could get ony control was by forging wir ain path. Chris has managed tae dae something really guid here tae mak his ain way, and he’s smashing it. I’ve never been greedy for money, I jist need tae no spend my life unhappy daein miserable things and working shite oors and that kinna stuff, so my career is mair a way o slightly monetising things that I’d dae for free!”

Ally explained earlier how he got into writing, and also gave some insight into his passion for the Scots language, and north-east dialects in particular, but what about the other stuff – until fairly recently, *presenting* just wasn’t a job? “Aye, so, I think that the modern media landscape is very fragmented and ye need tae hae multiple approaches tae send the same message. This is something I studied and I’ve learned that ye cannae jist communicate on a single platform ony mair in a single way if ye want tae get a message oot there. I’ve done quite a lot o work aroond trying tae promote the Scots language, no because that’s ony kinna career in itself it’s jist that while I’m daein aa this other stuff I can push that a bittie and I feel I can hae a guid impact wi it. Say ye’re trying tae promote the concept o Scots as a living language that should be mair respected. Ye can dae that, and I’ve done that in a *Courier* column for example, in a way that’ll hit a certain demographic – a thousand words, quite thoughtful, a bit o reflection and anecdote, a bit o academic study, bring that thegither and that’ll hit mebbe somebody wha’s a bit thoughtful and isnae feart o a thousand word article, that’ll sit and digest and mak their ain opinions aff the back o it. Ye can also dae it in a really snippy wee tweet that’s a wee bit provocative, ‘cause that’ll hit a different market. And then ye nicht dae it as a podcast, which’ll hit mebbe a younger, less university-educated but still quite informed upwardly mobile demographic there. And then, wi *presenting*, ye hit a slightly aulder demographic. So, for example, my BBC documentary aboot Scots, *Rebel Tongue*, hits a slightly different demographic, mebbe slightly mair English speaking, middle-class, bit o spare money, little bit aulder, wha widnae engage wi the ither articles or methods. So *presenting* is jist a way o communicating a message in a certain format. And I think ye hae tae dae it aa these days. That said, wi *Rebel Tongue*, that wis the audience I thought they were trying tae hit and I would say that the audience o fowk that’ve come up tae me and said they enjoyed it is different! And that’s great.

“Houiver, as Scotland moves towards being independent, which I fully expect and hope tae happen, there is a guid feck o fowk here that dinnae hae Scottish accents, ye

A fine Tay breeze wheechin up Ally's kilt!



ken, the previous generations. I wis at a funeral recently o a lovely lady fae the same village as me wha spoke wi quite a refined, borderline English, accent 'cause that's whit they thought they had tae dae." That reminds me of being screamed at by an English teacher when I was about 13 – *Speak the Queen's English boy!* Ally laughs as he recognises my tale: "As much as I dinnae agree wi ony o that, I think it's terrible, I dinnae want tae flip it the ither way so that we become the language polis, and ony Scottish fowk that dinnae speak the 'right way' are ostracised. Mebbe they jist had the misfortune tae go tae a private school – it's no their fault their parents were Tories! We still need tae gie them a chance tae tak pairt in the new Scotland that's emerging.

"But in the media, we need mair programmes that represent that new Scotland, a different Scotland, 'cause it's no jist one country – well, obviously it is jist one country but it's no jist one experience! And that's ane o the advantages we're gonnae get oot o this fragmenting media landscape, o which *iScot Magazine* is obviously a pairt. You get aa these different voices and different spaces that are aa legitimately Scottish voices saying things that you and me widnae agree wi or dinnae identify wi, and I think that's really guid. The auld BBC used tae broadcast tae mebbe 15 million fowk – if ye're communicating tae that many it has tae be the thinnest gruel that ye're serving them. But when ye're jist communicating tae an audience o, say 50,000, in a specific area, ye can speak tae them so clearly aboot their experience and reflect their experience back at them which is something that a fragmented media landscape allows us tae dae, which is very positive I think."

That mention of 'new Scotland' led us on nicely to talk about the indy movement and specifically the schisms which have developed, particularly online, since 2014: "I'd say the problem is wi so much time spent online ower the last 18 months. The way social media works is that the format tries tae push ye towards yer nearest extreme opinion because when ye're seeing things that mak ye respond strongly ye're less critical thinking, and ye're mair likely tae feel engaged as pairt o a cause, and if ye feel like ye're pairt o a specific niche cause then ye're mair likely tae spend time wi thae fowk online. Aa the platforms want

is mair time on their platform and the mair emotional ye are the less critical ye are o the ads ye're seeing, so ye're a mair responsive market. The mair time we've spent online the mair we've been getting radicalised by the nature o the platforms towards these unnecessarily extreme opinions. I certainly dinnae locate my politics around that kind o thing – my politics will outlast ony party or ony individual or onything like that, I ken whit I want, and it certainly isnae bound up tae ony o them.

"For me, politics follows culture and aa the discussion around the 1997 devolution referendum wis really important in helping develop a sense o Scotland again. We started tae reinvent wha we were and whit oor place in the world wis. I wis never raised tae be onything ither than Scottish, it wisnae even a question. My grandad was 95 when he voted for independence in 2014, he was buzzing, so no aa the demographics were against us! I think that we are noo in a generation whaur we expect tae hae maist o wir answers fae the Scottish Government, 'cause maist o the things that actually involve oor day-to-day lives are doon there at Holyrood, and Holyrood is a legitimate parliament in maist fowk's eyes. I also want tae be a European, that's so important tae my sense o identity, so it feels like time is o the essence. I feel I'm fou o beans right noo, where I can write for aa these different newspapers and magazines, get on the telly, be a guest on the news and that kinna thing, so if we hae a referendum I can really get behind it, really gie my time, energy and

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passion tae it. And I feel like there's an infrastructure the noo tae hae a really positive campaign, like everything you're daein and the magazine's daein. There's a load o fowk oot there that're primed and ready tae act, therefore I feel that noo's the time, noo's the oor!

"We ken why we need tae be independent. I would like tae get the vote done and dusted next year – I'd like tae get it done and dusted this year tae be honest! I think, realistically, if we held the vote the morn we'd probably win it but let's gie it time tae get the campaigning done and get the arguments oot there. The lead time wis, whit, 18 months for the last ane? Mebbe that wis a little long? So I'd say like, early next summer would be absolutely great? That gies us plenty o campaigning time, mebbe even next spring would be really nice? We're reading the tea leaves on this, but I think we've got the infrastructure in place. The SNP are slowly waning in the passions o the people, I would say, they've done whit they've done and they've been there for a lang time noo. We mebbe need a fundamental break fae that, 'cause otherwise fowk are jist gonnae get bored o them. That happens, ye get fatigue. But it feels like Britain's slowly drifting apart anyway."

We left the final part of Ally's portfolio career to last – mainly because we could still be blethering about it now! – and that's the role that he played fronting the online coverage of Dundee United's matches on DUTV over the last year while there were no spectators allowed into football stadia: "Aye, that wis a Covid thing. I've really enjoyed it but it was actually quite stressful! Maist o my day-to-day stuff is for a wide audience, so I'll dae, like, a Radio 4 programme and it's for mebbe a million people but I dinnae ken ony o them and it's no big deal. Even when I did *Rebel Tongue*, mebbe 100,000 people would've watched that in Scotland but it's diffuse, it's across the hale country. Whereas daein the DUTV stuff – it's the boy that lives upstairs and the lassie that works at the Scotmid round the corner and they're like, 'I've seen

He may have taken a long road round but he seems to have ended up exactly where he's meant to be, doing what he's meant to do, and is a fantastic ambassador for the new Scotland he so regularly cites

you'! Ye feel affy responsible and ye feel affy 'seen', like incredibly conspicuous. It felt a wee bittie weird daein something that wis very localised in terms o its audience. I wis actually bidding in Amsterdam at the start o Covid and I broached this idea o a pre-match show wi me and [ex-player] Seán Dillon, and a bit o content aroond that and, aye, it wis great fun. It wis great to spend time wi Seán – whit a great lad – and daein content for a community ye care about is whit I've always done. Getting tae dae content for the Dundee United support, which is a group o fowk I really love – and really love being a part o and really respect – wis exciting. I've took it as a bit o professional pressure but I loved being able tae gie my energy tae that. There's a big international audience too, wi United supporters aa aroond the world. This season, wi crowds back in, we're trying tae mak something fresh, something different, something that helps reconnect fans wi the club a bit and gets the players back involved tae, 'cause the players hae been affy isolated an aa."

Ally's enthusiasm for each of his career strands, and the energy and positivity he exudes, is infectious. He may have taken a long road round but he seems to have ended up exactly where he's meant to be, doing what he's meant to do, and is a fantastic ambassador for the new Scotland he so regularly cites. He also takes a fair bit of good-natured mickey-taking over his bromance with Seán Dillon – who he regularly refers to as the 'Dublin Dreamboat!' – but, speaking purely from a Dundee United supporter's point of view, their efforts helped enormously in lifting the spirits of those of us of a tangerine persuasion over that strange period. His DUTV stint, hopefully, explains the final piece of the fruit-related reference in the opening paragraph! As if that – alongside his Scots language and culture presentation gigs, a new *Dundee Courier* column, and various other projects – wasn't enough to be going on with, Ally is also in the final throes of submitting his Masters degree dissertation to the University of Dundee, on "illicit whisky in the Angus glens as we moved fae tribal to capitalist societies" – once again this is reflective of his journey to understand and appreciate his homeland. One wee bit of trivia that came up during our discussion is that Olympic multi-gold-medal cyclist Chris Hoy is his second cousin – a fact that Ally acknowledges with a laugh and a quick-as-a-flash response, "Aye that's true, but Chris disnae like tae boast about it" – maybe he should start!

