

Singer, antiquarian and deceiver

Alexander Gordon

c.1692-c.1754

British society was not always friendly to men of talent and ambition who lacked money.

Alexander Gordon was an example.

He was remarkable in many ways, for his failings as much as his abilities.

In his twenties he travelled from Aberdeen to Italy and from 1716-18 was singing as an operatic tenor in some of Europe's greatest theatres.

A year later he triumphed in London.

But Alexander's interests turned to antiquarianism and he headed for Scotland to produce some fine work on its Roman heritage.

Despite his abilities – he taught drawing and languages – his dreams always ran ahead of his achievements.

Alexander made frequent shifts of direction and often scabbled for employment, fighting off debt as he sought his big break.

Schemes to buy fine art for the aristocracy and to build canals all came and went.

His was described as a man of “some learning, some ingenuity, much pride, much deceit, and very little honesty”.

He strove to become a recognised expert on the past and became secretary to Scotland's esteemed society of antiquaries.

Yet little ever seemed to come good – for example Alexander's efforts to understand Ancient Egyptian religion attracted ridicule.

In 1741 he turned his back on everything and headed for Carolina in the American colonies.

Quite suddenly he flourished, acting as the attorney for a provincial registrar, buying land in Charles Town and Ansonborough.

The 'Land of Opportunity' rewarded Alexander with the status and wealth he had always craved.

He even finally completed his beloved book on the Ancient Egyptians and in his will asked his son to see it to the press.

Even at the last Alexander was let down.

The work was never published, though the manuscript survives.

- Read the Oxford DNB biography here: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/dnb/11021.html>.