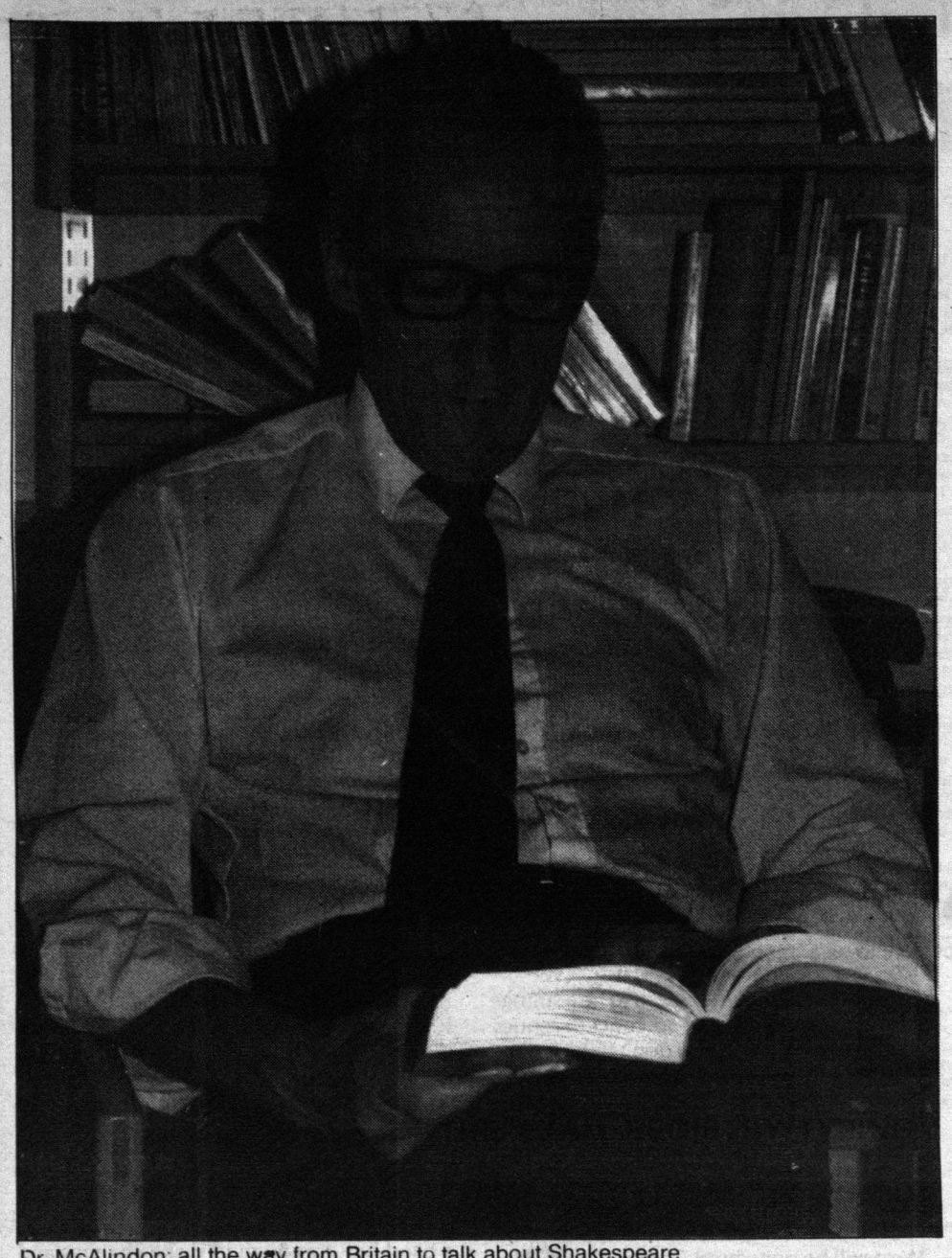

Dr. McAlindon: all the way from Britain to talk about Shakespeare

The Bard's tragedies continue to fascinate

interview by Carole Amerongen

Teaching Shakespeare is an envied position in any English department. Professor Thomas McAlindon agrees. Dr. McAlindon is now at the University of Alberta as a distinguished visitor in the Department of English. While being interviewed, the Professor, who resumes his regular position at the University of Hull (England) in October, expressed his zeal for lecturing on Shakespeare both at home and abroad. "It's the same here I gather," he said. "Everybody likes to teach Shakespeare."

Dr. McAlindon six-part lecture series, *Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos*, started Monday, September 14th and runs until Thursday September 24th. The hour long lectures, held in Room L-3 of the Humanities Centre, are free and open to the public and the university community.

"It tells us much about human nature: all the really wonderful things, and all the most terrifying things."

This is not Professor McAlindon's first visit to this country. The Professor and his family spent a year in Canada while he was a visiting Professor at the University of Ottawa. The McAlindons lived in the small town of Arnprior, Ontario, where thay were able to "get into the community and get to know people." The professor adds, "It was a most rich and enjoyable experience."

The Professor's Canadian visit also allowed him to draw some conclusions concerning the differences between Canadian and British students of Shakespeare. The British student begins his study at the age of twelve. Standard national exams, given at ages sixteen and eighteen, require knowledge of Shakespeare's plays. As well, field trips are regularily made to Stratford on Avon to view plays. Most Canadian students study only three Shakespearean plays in High School; unless they go to university, their study of Shakespeare is completed. Because of this difference, the British are usually more at ease with Shakespearean drama.

But Professor McAlindon contends that the study of Shakespeare can intimidate any student simply because of its content. "It's full of the most complex, learned allusions which presuppose a whole body of knowledge which the contemporary student doesn't have. It presupposes that you know the Bible very well. It presupposes that you know classical mythology. It presupposes that you had a sixteenth century education. It's like many good things," he adds, "when you've gotten past the initial barriers, you're into it."

Can the modern reader or playgoer benefit from the message in Shakespeare's works to the extent that audiences of past centuries did? Dr. McAlindon is certain this is possible, especially, "when Shakespeare makes you incredibly conscious of the extreme complexity and contradictoriness of human nature." In other words, all people, past and present, have the ability to be both extremely good-natured and ill-natured in certain situations. Characters like MacBeth, Othello and King Lear behave in this manner.

King Lear is Dr. McAlindon's favorite play for a reason that he expresses with heartfelt enthusiam, "It tells us much about human nature: all the really wonderful things, and all the most terrifying things." Professor McAlindon also appreciates the play's simple style which relates "a most profound feeling". For example, King Lear, who has been unnecessarily cruel to his daughter, Cordelia, tells her that she has reason to hate him. But Cordelia simply replies, "No cause. No cause." This succint reply, a favorite line of Dr. McAlindon, reflects the play's simple style.

For Professor McAlindon, Shakespeare and English literature in general is never boring, always new. His current enthusiasm is for the tragedies, the subject of his current lecture series. In turn, these lectures outline his upcoming book. After the completion of that work, Professor McAlindon will probably begin more projects, since it is his intention to "teach Shakespeare until (he) is two hundred."

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