Hello, I’m Alasdair Raffe, I’m a Chancellor’s Fellow in History and my research is concerned with Politics, Religion and Ideas in 17th and 18th Century Scotland.

My course for the Online MSc is called “Athens of the North: The origins and ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment”.

I’ve chosen as a title for the course the well-known late 18th, 19th century nick name for Edinburgh that is “Athens of the North” to summarise not only a common self-understanding of the people who acted in the Scottish Enlightenment of Edinburgh, but also a common historical interpretation which is that Edinburgh was the city that gave the intellectual resources to the growing British empire.

As a historian of the late part of the early modern period I am fascinated with the word ‘modernity’ and what we mean by that. Particularly with how changes in society and ideas in politics take place at the end of the 17th century through the 18th century. So one of the things we are trying to do as historians I think of this period, is to answer the question “how does a society like Scotland become modern, what does that mean?” And one of the conventional answers to that question is through the processes we call the Scottish Enlightenment.

My course has two particular aims I think. One is to put the Scottish Enlightenment into context, to look at some of the circumstances surrounding its origins and its development in society in the 18th century. The second aim is to read some of the texts on the Scottish Enlightenment themselves, because I think there is no substitute for getting into the heads of these thinkers and to read their works and by doing that we can engage precisely with what they were concerned with and not with what more modern commentators say about them.

I hope that the course gives students a chance to think for themselves about some of these texts; David Hume, Adam Smith, William Robertson. In the modern world we have too many thinkers who grasp on to these great figures and try to make their own readings of them, which aren’t necessarily historically informed readings, stand for what Hume and Smith and others thought. I hope that by engaging with the text directly students can form their own opinions and be more critical about the way in which some of these thinkers are used in our present context.

I hope that students who have chosen to study at the University of Edinburgh for this online degree will take an interest in the history of Scotland and indeed the history of the City. A lot of the developments that we refer to as the Scottish Enlightenment either took place within Edinburgh or involved people who regularly visited the city. And we can see it in the history of the University, in the history of some of the influential politicians who were connected with Edinburgh in the 18th century and I hope that this course will help to inspire people to take a further interest in that and think a little bit about how the sense of place contributes to our understanding of the past.