Over the course of three decades at UNC Greensboro, Dr. Christopher Hodgkins has served as author or editor of eight books on Renaissance literature, the Bible, and the British imperial imagination. Along the way, he’s been at the forefront of efforts to re-shape the way we read and interpret the works of seventeenth-century English poet and clergyman George Herbert.

“Nearly all of Herbert’s poems are quite brief,” says Hodgkins, “but they’re all different. He’s a profound artist, a craftsman of tremendous precision.”

Herbert gives us, he says, “a master class in craft – how to handle a variety of voices within an individual lyric poem and through a sequence, how to stir surprise and drama and wonder with just a few words, how to experiment with form and structure in creative ways that are not quite free verse.”

Herbert also resonates with Hodgkins’ own Christian outlook – from his first reading of Herbert’s “The Temple,” published posthumously in 1633, Hodgkins felt Herbert was putting into words much of his own experience with God. But he notes that Herbert has had a huge following among secular readers and poets as well, despite the devotional nature of his poetry. “There’s something universal in Herbert’s work that appeals across these divides of ideology and belief,” he says.

“The night before King Charles I was beheaded by the Puritans in January of 1649, he is said to have read ‘The Temple.’ But many of the Puritans – including some who beheaded the king – were reading ‘The Temple,’ too.”

Hodgkins’ own research has expanded modern understandings of the Cambridge-educated poet-priest. “He’s mainly a figure who’s interested in the inner spiritual life, but for a long time, people assumed that all that interested Herbert. He was seen as like a medieval monk who retired from the world.”

Yet, in comparing Herbert’s poetry with other texts, Hodgkins found that Herbert continued to be far more engaged with current events and politics than many nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary critics recognized. “We discovered in his writings that even while he was out in this little village parish church in Wilshurst, he was still thinking very poignantly about national and international politics of his time. We now see him as much more topically engaged. He was a member of Parliament and wrote about how to deal with contemporary social problems and political issues – including a poetic critique of rising imperialism.”

Hodgkins’ initial interest in religious poetry and the political and religious contexts for literature brought him to what he calls the question of the imperial imagination, a subject of his second book.

“Now do people imagine their right to go and either take or conquer – or colonize – other lands and people? Do they just say ‘I’m doing it because I can?’ Usually not. Various European explorers sailed across the ocean and found lands inhabited by other peoples – and they built a system whereby they could exploit those resources while telling themselves they were bringing blessings to those people.”

Today, Hodgkins continues his exploration of how cultures collide, collaborate, or combine – specifically in the context of transatlantic exchange – through his work with the Atlantic World Research Network. Connecting scholars across six continents, the UNC Greensboro network, which was founded and is directed by Hodgkins, is approaching its 20th anniversary.
Hodgkins holds a first edition of “The Temple” from UNCG’s collection. It was
travel-sized, he says, by design.

“One of the secrets of Herbert’s success was the design of “The Temple” early editions. It came in a small de luxe style book – about the size and shape of a modern smartphone – so that the book fit in your pocket and could be carried everywhere. The book had an index for locating poems on different topics to interest varied readers: “Gratitude” for some, “Greatness” for others, and everything from “The Sinner” to “The Stars,” to Thousanda” to three poems simply called “Love.””

The Herbert Collection at UNC Greensboro

A little-known fact is the first modern biography of George Herbert came out of UNCG in 1971. The author was Dr. Amy Charles, who began working at the University when it was still Woman’s College. She also purchased with her own money almost every one of the earliest editions of “The Temple.”

“By the time of her death in 1985,” says Hodgkins, “she had donated all of these to UNCG Special Collections.” The collection was completed at the University through the work of Chancellor William Moran and Special Collections librarian Kimmy Mills and William Finley.

“Thus our Herbert collection is one of the world’s best, ranking with those at Harvard, the Folger Shakespeare Library, and the Bodleian at Oxford,” he says. UNCG Libraries is a point of pride for Hodgkins.

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