



CHARLES HENRY HUNTER BLAIR

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M.A., D.LITT., F.S.A.

A Memoir

CHARLES HENRY HUNTER BLAIR (1863-1962) adorned our Society for so many years and with so much zeal that the blank left by his passing invites no successor. A wholesale boot-and-shoe merchant of great acumen and intelligence, he knew instinctively that a life exclusively devoted to everyday affairs could become mere Dead Sea ashes if it had no balance of contrasting interests and activities. He was, moreover, reared during the aftermath of the Romantic movement, in an intellectual and artistic environment which fired his delight in pageantry and its heraldic expression. This combination, of business man, used to accurate specification, and the keen lover of the medieval world's outward expression, produced a swift discernment which always sought the basic facts. His early study of the Durham seals constituted a magnificent *catalogue raisonné* of that most splendid of Northern collections and established once and for all his place among the scholar-antiquaries of Northumbria. To hear him talk of heraldry was to learn what avid knowledge could achieve and how much zest for fresh ventures it could inspire. Not all his excursions into the Middle Ages were based upon first sources. The studies of northern sheriffs and northern knights drew upon the standard published editions of medieval documents. But his intention, fulfilled with an elegant precision, was to extract from them the raw material which would enable him to illustrate what part the great families of the North Country had played in important historical events or in an administration whose quality so much depended upon *noblesse*. The entire history

of the Northern and Middle Marches was opened up to the readers of *Archæologia Aeliana* by this revealing and refreshing treatment of what might have seemed the dry bones of history.

It cannot be said that our dear old friend consciously shared Benedetto Croce's belief in the educative and fertilising power of local history. But he was in fact a shining example of all that Croce so long preached on the part to be played by such historians in the cause of intellectual freedom and truth: and it is in this context that his services to a wider public have their place. In middle life he lectured much to audiences throughout the North upon many themes, including among them Hadrian's Wall, in which, as a true pupil of Collingwood Bruce, he always took the liveliest interest. It was this general love of cultural things that led him naturally to the Council of the Literary and Philosophical Society, our own elder sister, and to its Presidency, an office which he held for forty-two years to the admiration of all and greatly to the profit of the Society. He was an admirable chairman, whose patience won support and whose practicality commanded it. The same qualities made him an ideal choice for the chairmanship of the Newcastle upon Tyne Diocesan Advisory Committee, when added to an intimate knowledge of all the older churches of the diocese and a real sense of design, which gave him a feeling not only for traditional art but for its modern developments. If heraldry were in question he would reign unchallenged, and woe betide the weak craftsman who made an error of tincture or drew a beast inadequately.

It was, again, natural that all these interests should have linked him with the University of Durham and most closely with Armstrong College, later King's College, at Newcastle upon Tyne. In the earlier days, when the College was still small, his Jesmond home, where until 1930 his gracious wife presided, to be succeeded by his devoted daughter Lesley, was a constant meeting-place for all members of staff concerned, however remotely, with local studies. The well-

remembered study, packed with good books and drawings and pottery to match, will long be remembered as a setting in which he shone. They and many others will recall his drawing-room, now the setting for quiet conversations in the long northern twilight, now crowded, for example, with birthday guests, who were ever prouder of the occasion as the years wrought their gentle transmutation, so gradual that he seemed to defy time. From this background he entered more and more fully into University and College affairs, as a member of the University Senate and Excavation Committee and for long a member of the College Council and Library Committee and a devoted supporter of its Art School. These services alone would have richly merited the degree of Master of Arts conferred upon him, but his work for learning and for our Society presently won him a doctorate of Letters, a source of pride and pleasure to himself and his wide circle of friends.

Yet it was our own Society which claimed his longest and deepest devotion. He joined it in 1900 as a young man and a keen bicyclist, long before the internal combustion engine had ousted leisurely enjoyment of the road. He followed awheel the Roman Wall Pilgrimage of 1906. He was our Librarian from 1904 until 1930 and a member of Council from 1904 onwards, regular in attendance, wise in understanding, shrewd in maintaining a balance of interest within the Society's activities, and acute above all in observing the worth and prowess of its younger members. Here his business instincts, trained in "the courts of men", served him and the Society well, just as they lay behind his watchful eye upon our finances. He was an indefatigable President (1935-36), and only his intimate friends knew how much thought he gave to every aspect of presidential business. But his most heartfelt devotion and constancy were given to the editorship of *Archæologia Aeliana*, which he held from 1924 until 1961. Editors of other journals might fail or flag or cast the toy aside: he knew none but the end which Nature set, and had his fill of the insistent exactions of a self-set

time-table or of the thankless tasks associated with difficult or inept contributors. Forty worthy volumes of *Archæologia Aeliana* stand to his credit, *monumentum aere perennius*.

What may be said of his personality? Its versatility, humanity and determination have already been indicated. But to all this there was added good humour, good sense and the liveliest of conversational powers. He was a most devoted husband and father, and his sons, Mr. Thornton Blair, a prosperous farmer in Cambridgeshire, and Mr. Peter Hunter Blair, senior tutor of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and author of distinguished works upon Anglo-Saxon history, live to do him credit and to have given him the joy of grandchildren. We have seen at closer hand the selfless devotion which he evoked in his daughter, who for long indexed our volumes and who for over thirty years after her mother's death accompanied and supported him in all his doings and presided over his hospitable home. This loving care and solace were unquestionably the basis of his long and happy later years. *Felix opportunitate!* Time allowed him to grow old gracefully, and to conserve almost to the end the rhythm of an active life. When he felt his powers no longer equal to the daily round he wrote a letter worth quotation, to wit: "I shall retire this March. I have served the firm, man and boy, for seventy years and for fifty years as managing director. I think I have ta'en my wages." Two years later, on 4 September, 1962, we could add, "home he's gone"; and this was the end of an epoch.

I. A. Richmond

