

SIR DANIEL WILSON AND THE *PREHISTORIC ANNALS OF SCOTLAND*: A CENTENARY STUDY

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IN the study of any science, it is always a rewarding thing occasionally to go back and read again the great classical treatises that have provided the foundation material for the modern development of the subject. About such works there clings an indelible impression of youthful vigour and freshness, of the deployment of broad philosophical principles, in those happy days before our scientific disciplines became so bogged down in technicalities, and so overweighted by the sheer burden of accumulated fact—to the extent that the modern scientist, compelled inexorably to an ever-narrowing specialisation, is sometimes uncharitably described as knowing more and more about less and less. Moreover, the great nineteenth-century pioneers of science did not disdain to write literature, in marked contrast to the modern tendency to write jargon. Thus in archaeology, when we read about the cross-fertilisation and hybridisation of Beakers; when we find old and well-established terms such as Windmill Hill and Peterborough, Hallstatt and La Tène, superseded by letters of the alphabet, or even by letters and figures in a kind of pseudo-algebraical combination; when we are told that the Larnians were ‘advanced enough in technology’ to cross the North Channel—in other words, they had boats—when we find two old ladies, thought to be sacrificially buried in a prehistoric hut, described, poor dears, as ‘ideological lubricants’—then we begin to wonder whether the writing of books on archaeology has ceased to be an exercise in literature, and is on the fair road to becoming what a seventeenth-century critic described as ‘the obfuscation of understanding’.

It is for such reasons that, in my submission, every modern geologist would do well to read over again, once in a while, Lyell’s *Principles*—or, if he be a Scot, to read and reread the splendidly eloquent writings of Hugh Miller. In the same way, the biologist of today would refresh his soul, and renew his grasp of first principles, by reading again Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. And it is with such considerations in mind that I have the honour of inviting your attention this evening to the first great scientific study of the whole field of Scottish archaeology, from the earliest traces of human occupation in our land, down to the close of the Middle Ages. The book in question is Sir Daniel Wilson’s *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*, of which the second edition was published in 1863—just one hundred years ago. Hence it seemed to me that a backward glance at this famous book might be a suitable contribution to the proceedings of our Annual Meeting in this centenary year of the final form of Wilson’s work.

Often, in rereading a classical work on science or history, it is well to go back to the first edition. Later issues, revising, patching, darning, amending and qualifying as the weight and scope of knowledge increased, tend to lose something of their

early zest. How infinitely better to read is the first edition of Collingwood Bruce's *Handbook to the Roman Wall*, than the eleventh or latest edition, brought up to date as it has been with unrivalled mastery and scholarship. But in the case of Sir Daniel Wilson's book, the second edition, so carefully revised and enlarged by the author, and so greatly benefiting by his study of contemporary primitive communities in the New World, is in every way a better and more satisfying work than the first. It is with this second edition that I propose to deal in the present short evaluation of what undoubtedly is a major landmark in the early development of the science of archaeology.

Perhaps at the outset I may justify this claim by venturing to repeat what I wrote as a contribution to the standard life of Sir Daniel Wilson, published in 1929 by the late Mr H. H. Langton, at that time my opposite number in Toronto University. This is what I then said:

He was unquestionably the pioneer of scientific Scottish archaeology, and in some respects he led the way for the whole world. I know of no book, with the exception of Worsaae's *Primeval Antiquities of Denmark*, which gave so systematic an account of the archaeology of any northern country as the first edition of Wilson's work did for Scotland. As you probably know, he was the first man to propound the view that the Celts were not the earliest human race in Britain, and quite recently Sir Arthur Keith has paid him a special tribute as a pioneer for the whole world in the application of craniometry to archaeological questions.

Incidentally, and upon a minor point, it was Wilson who in this work first coined the word 'prehistoric', which has now obtained universal currency in the English-speaking world.

Daniel Wilson was born in Edinburgh on 5th January 1816, the eldest child of a not very successful wine merchant, Archibald Wilson, who came from Argyllshire. A younger brother was Dr George Wilson, one of the most distinguished chemists of the early nineteenth century, and from 1855 until his untimely death in 1859, Regius Professor of Technology in the University of Edinburgh. It seems probable that both these brothers, Daniel and George, derived their outstanding gifts of intellect, as well as their earnest piety, from their mother, Janet Aitken, a Greenock lady of remarkable strength and originality of character. From his mother certainly Daniel inherited his artistic skill and literary ability. The two boys were sent to Edinburgh High School; and, while their schoolmates spent their leisure in youthful sports, young Daniel and George 'ransacked the wynds and closes of Edinburgh for quaint nooks and old buildings'. Already as a schoolboy Daniel had begun to make those sketches of ancient houses in the Capital which in due course were to appear in his first famous book, *Memorials of Edinburgh in the Olden Time*, published in 1847. This work, it is scarcely necessary to remind you, is of permanent value because it has preserved the appearance of old Edinburgh in the days before the remorseless hand of modern 'improvement' swept away so many of its picturesque buildings. The originals of his beautiful drawings for this richly illustrated book are now preserved in the Library of our Society.

Nobody who has looked at these drawings can gainsay that Wilson was an artist of outstanding ability. In fact it was his first intention to earn his living in this way;

and so in 1835, with a boldness which in retrospect seems downright reckless, he left the University of Edinburgh without taking a degree, and two years later, with no more than five pounds in his pocket, made his way up to London. Already for a few years he had been learning, in his spare time, the art of steel engraving from William Miller, a well-known Edinburgh engraver and connoisseur. In London he was fortunate to obtain an introduction to Turner, who commissioned the young Scotsman to execute a steel engraving of what is certainly not nowadays accounted one of the best of Turner's paintings, *The Embarkation of Regulus*. Wilson himself has given us a vivid and amusing account of his stormy interviews with the great English landscape painter, and how in the end the peppery old gentleman accepted his ideas as to the way in which the picture should be altered to make it more suitable for a steel engraving. The story does not concern us here, except in so far as it reveals the strength of will and tenacity of conviction which, long afterwards, were to be Sir Daniel Wilson's mainstay in the high and difficult office of President of Toronto University.

For three years Wilson struggled to establish himself as an artist in London, eking out his scanty earnings by literary hack-work. In 1840 he married Margaret Mackay, daughter of a Glasgow business man. Possessed of practical ability and a 'calm sough', she proved an invaluable helpmeet to her husband until her death in Toronto in 1885.

Daniel Wilson's heart was always anchored in Scotland. So in 1842 he returned to Edinburgh, where he continued to make a modest income by miscellaneous writing. For a number of years he was art critic to *The Scotsman*. In 1846 he was elected a Fellow of our Society, and next year became one of its honorary secretaries. This latter year, 1847, saw the publication of *Memorials of Edinburgh*, which at once earned its author national fame. In 1849 he published the first printed catalogue of our Museum. Two years later, in 1851, appeared the first edition of his *magnum opus*, under the title of *The Archaeology and Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*. It placed him forthwith in the front rank of European archaeologists; and in the same year the University of St Andrews awarded the author the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws. This distinction was particularly valued by Wilson, since he had left Edinburgh University without obtaining a degree.

Meantime, in 1845, Wilson had made one of the most interesting 'finds' of his life: the rediscovery of St Margaret's Chapel in Edinburgh Castle. This was followed in 1853 by the restoration of the venerable little building, at the command of Queen Victoria; and long afterwards, in 1887, Wilson published a careful and comprehensive account of the Chapel in our *Proceedings*.¹

Now a married man with two little daughters, Wilson naturally was anxious to find a more secure livelihood than freelance writing. Already in 1848 he had applied, unsuccessfully, for the post of Keeper of the Advocates' Library. So, when at the age of thirty-seven he was offered, in 1853, the Chair of History and English Literature in University College, Toronto, at a salary of £350 a year, like many another Scot, before and since, he turned his back upon his native land and crossed the

¹ *P.S.A.S.*, XXI (1886-7), 291-316.

broad Atlantic to seek his fortune in the New World. Yet still he had not lost his hope of obtaining a post in one of the Scottish Universities; and in 1863 he was a strongly favoured candidate for the Chair of English Literature in Edinburgh, vacant through the death of Professor Aytoun. In the end, however, David Masson was the successful applicant.

With Wilson's highly distinguished career in Toronto we are not here concerned; nor am I competent to assess his services to Canadian education. Sufficient to say that in 1881 he was appointed President of his College, that, in the interval, he had been offered, and had declined, the post of Minister of Education in the Ontario Government, and also the Principalship of a new University proposed to be established at London, Ontario; and had been recommended for the post of Historiographer-Royal for Scotland, which however was given to William Forbes Skene. In 1887 Wilson was appointed first President of the University of Toronto. In those days, university education in Canada was even more bedevilled by party politics than it is now becoming in our own country; and what was worse, university politics were largely dictated by sectarian rivalries. The story of Wilson's long struggle for the independence of his university is best summed up in his own words:

I have resolutely battled for the maintenance of a national system of university education in opposition to sectarian or denominational colleges. In this I have been successful, and I regard it as the great work of my life.

In the opinion of those best able to judge, Wilson ranks among the foremost pioneers of higher education in Canada, and is regarded as having left an indelible mark upon the academic history of his adopted country.

Amid all these preoccupations Wilson never lost his love for Scotland, or his interest in her antiquities. Neither was his pen idle. In 1862 he published his third major work, *Prehistoric Man: Researches into the Origin of Civilisation in the Old and New Worlds*. Though I suspect that it is little read now, yet the two volumes of this book represented in their own way a very important achievement. For the first time, the problems of prehistoric man were approached by way of an intensive study of communities still living a primitive life in the New World. Wilson's central theme was that of the Red Man as he existed a century ago; and in the elucidation of his way of life and modes of thought Wilson undertook long and arduous journeys, during summer vacations, studying the Indian tribes then dwelling in a primitive state in the wild country north of Lake Superior, as well as making more than one expedition to the territory of the mound-builders in the United States. As always, he took his sketching pad with him. Toronto University still possesses many charming drawings illustrating the scenes that he visited in the course of these travels.

Next year saw the publication of the second and definitive edition of his great work, now under the title of *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*. It appeared in two volumes, richly illustrated, including many drawings by his own skilful hand. The way in which he managed to keep himself in touch with the rapid progress of archaeological discovery in his native land, and indeed throughout Western and Northern Europe, and the labour involved in correcting the proofs of so massive a work, which of course had to travel to and fro between Toronto and Edinburgh, must fill with admiration

the minds of all of us who have any experience of the gross drudgery that goes into the making of a book.

In 1876 Wilson was instrumental in securing the return to Scotland of one of the major treasures now in our National Museum. This was the celebrated *Quigrich* or Crosier of St Fillan, which its hereditary custodian had taken with him on emigrating to Canada.

During all those busy years, Wilson's pen was by no means idle in his adopted country. In 1858 he became editor of the *Journal* of the Canadian Institute, in 1859 its President, and in 1863 he was granted the first silver medal of the Natural History Society, awarded for original research. In 1882 he was elected Vice-President of the Literature Section of the Canadian Royal Society, and three years later he became its President. In 1888 he was knighted by Queen Victoria; but amid all this accumulation of honours the one which probably he prized the most came his way in 1891, when he was awarded the freedom of his native city. For some years Sir Daniel had been afflicted with failing eyesight; and on 29th June 1892, after a severe inward struggle, he wrote out his resignation as President of Toronto University. But that resignation was never accepted; for on 6th August, after a short illness, he died. Alike as artist, archaeologist, author and educational reformer, Sir Daniel Wilson deserves to rank among the foremost of his time.

This is not the place to set out, even in a bald list, Wilson's vast literary output. It may, however, be recalled that he produced what is still a standard life of Chatterton; and I should like to mention one of his most original and charming works, a little study of left-handedness. Himself a left-handed man, in his painting work he was ambidextrous.

In middle life, Wilson had jet-black hair, and shaved himself clean save for the then fashionable side-whiskers. Later, he allowed hair and beard to grow; and because both in course of time became snow-white, without much baldness, his appearance in the evening of his days was one of striking dignity, as may be seen from the well-known triple portrait by Sir George Reid, now in our National Portrait Gallery.

The *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*, to use the title of the second edition, is a handsome octavo work in two volumes, published by Macmillan. In all it comprises 590 pages and contains 240 illustrations in the text, besides 25 plates. The book is divided into four parts: The Primeval or Stone Period; The Archaic or Bronze Period; The Iron Period; and The Christian Period. Summing up the effect of the whole comprehensive survey, the late Sir Arthur Keith claimed that 'Daniel Wilson was the pioneer for the whole country in building up history from excavation and inquiry outside of all written language'. Wilson himself in his Preface described the aim of the work as 'to rescue archaeological research from that limited range to which a too exclusive devotion to classical studies had given rise; and, especially in relation to Scotland, to prove how greatly more comprehensive and important are its native antiquities than all the traces of intruded arts'. Furthermore, he proclaimed the goal which he had set before himself, namely that of 'establishing a consistent and comprehensive system of Scottish archaeology'.

In this matter of Wilson's conception of his theme there is an important point to be made. Professor Piggott, in his masterly little book, *British Prehistory*, has drawn a useful distinction between archaeology, 'the techniques which obtain the prehistorian's source material', and prehistory, 'the interpretation and synthesis of the material relics of ancient man'. Now according to these definitions, Wilson was emphatically the prehistorian, in contrast to his successor Joseph Anderson, who in the famous Rhind Lectures limited himself more strictly to what Professor Piggott would describe as 'the techniques of archaeology'. Moreover, Wilson could perceive no limit to the possibilities of interpreting the unwritten past by the methods of prehistory. 'Intelligent research', he boldly asserted, 'has already accomplished so much that ignorance alone can presume to resign any past event to utter oblivion.' One requires only to contrast Wilson's approach to his theme with the perverse obscurantism of John Hill Burton's two notorious chapters, in his *History of Scotland*, entitled 'The Unrecorded Ages', to see that in this matter Daniel Wilson was setting a standard and proclaiming a challenge far in advance of his contemporaries.

Devout Christian as he was, Wilson fully accepted the then explosive doctrine of evolution. He has left on record his conviction that 'truth has nothing to fear in the long run from the researches of such men as Darwin and Huxley'. So in the new edition of his *magnum opus* we find a striking statement, *apropos* of the recent discoveries of fossil man in Pleistocene deposits. His science, so Sir Daniel comments, discovers to the archaeologist 'the links by which his pursuits take hold of the great chain of truth: and in a new sense shows man, not as an isolated creation, but as the last and best of an order of animated beings, whose line sweeps back into the shadows of an unmeasured past'. It is easy now to forget how bold was this language in the year 1863—particularly in a book primarily addressed to a Scottish audience.

In his chapter on 'Sepulchral Memorials', we find Wilson expressing the remarkably prescient forecast that inhumation would prove to be 'the most ancient of all modes of disposing of the dead', and that 'the first practice of cremation' should be assigned to the Bronze Age. And even for some modern prehistorians, there is a wise caution in his reminder that megalithic monuments, so widespread in Europe and Asia, are 'the evidence not of a single creed, but of one remarkable phase of the human mind'. But by far the most important chapter in Part I—indeed in the whole book—is that entitled 'Crania of the tumuli'. Its conclusions, which still remain valid today, have thus been summarised by Robert Munro:

As early as 1850 Sir Daniel Wilson maintained, as a result of the investigation of the craniological materials then available, that the earliest British people were characterised by markedly elongated and narrow skulls, to which he gave the name kumbecephalic; and that after a time a brachycephalic people appeared on the scene, who, though still practising the simple methods of living prevalent in the Stone Age, were to some extent acquainted with the use of bronze.

Bearing in mind the state of knowledge, paucity of accessible material, and prevalent ideas at the time it was written, I affirm that this ninth chapter of Wilson's book deserves to rank as one of the most masterly surveys of an intricate subject that the archaeological literature of any country can show.

When we pass on to the Bronze Age, we find our author equally in advance of his time. He declares his conviction that 'a transitional age of copper is naturally to be looked for, at least in Britain', and repeats the opinion that 'the introduction of the primitive metallurgic arts' should be ascribed to the brachycephalic race of Scotland. Yet—again anticipating all modern opinion—he is satisfied that the introduction of bronze should not be ascribed 'entirely to a new people', but that 'on the contrary, the evidence of slow and very gradual change is manifest'. In his chapter on 'Primitive Bronze' in the preparation of which he enjoyed the assistance, in analysing Bronze Age tools and weapons, of his brother, the chemist, Dr George Wilson, he again reaches conclusions which have been upheld by more modern research: namely that the bronze implements found in Scotland were not 'derived entirely from one source', but that they were the work of 'isolated manufacturers, very partially acquainted with the properties of the standard compound, and guided, for the most part, by the practical experience of the result of their labours'.

Sir Daniel's plea for 'a complete monograph of the native pottery of the British Isles' shows him aware of a *desideratum* which had to wait half a century before it was supplied by Lord Abercromby. 'The ethnologist', says Wilson, 'discovers in the Roman urn or embossed Samian ware, and the glazed pottery of the Anglo-Saxons, the evidence of the revolution of races, and the displacement of native by intruded arts. But the older examples preserve the memorials of successive stages of development unaffected by foreign influence, and full of interest not only as a part of Britain's primeval history, but in their more comprehensive bearing on the innate sources of man's progressive civilisation.'

So far as I am aware, Wilson was the first person to suggest that some of the impressed patterns on Bronze Age pottery could have been derived from the practice of enclosing the fragile clay with a plaiting of cords or rushes; and in support of this conjecture he was able to draw upon his knowledge of similar practices among primitive tribes on the other side of the Atlantic.

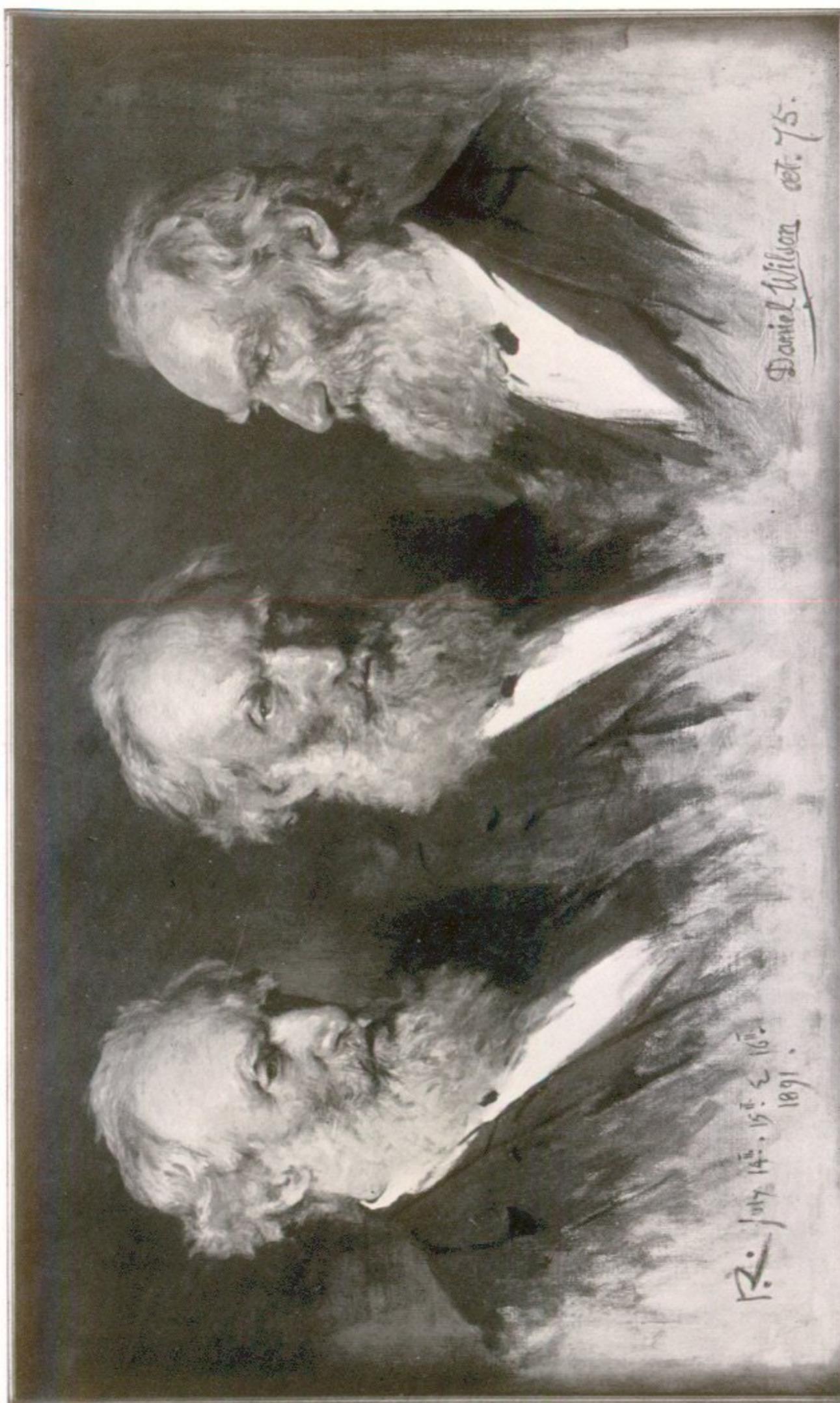
In discussing the introduction of iron into Britain, Sir Daniel makes the pregnant remark that 'it is to Asia we must turn for the true source of many primitive arts, nor will the canons of archaeology be established on a safe foundation till the antiquities of that older continent have been explored and classified'. How true remains this postulate today, after a century of intensive work by European and American archaeologists! Passing on to the Roman invasions, I need do no more than to quote the opinion of Sir George Macdonald, who says that Wilson's 'handling of the Roman question as a whole is conspicuous for its sober and balanced common sense'. Quite recent research has led point to the inference which Wilson drew from the finding of coins of Caracalla and Diocletian at Cramond. On the other hand, air photography and modern techniques in rapid exploratory excavation have much abated the force of his gibe about the waste of time involved in discussing 'the weary battle of Mons Graupius' by Scottish archaeologists who, he thinks, in this particular quest, 'are thrashing straw from which the very chaff has long since been gleaned to the last husk'.

Sir Daniel Wilson was not only far in advance of his time as a pioneer of pre-

history, in the sense in which Professor Piggot has defined the term. He was likewise an accomplished historian; and his chapter on 'Historical Data', which introduces Part IV of his work, is, like his survey of the Roman period, a model of 'sober and balanced common sense' in the handling of a period about which much nonsense has been and continues to be written. In dealing with the 'Sculptured Standing Stones' he had of course the advantage of being able to use the admirable pioneer works of Patrick Chalmers and John Stuart. His discussion of Norse antiquities in Scotland reveals him as fully abreast of Scandinavian scholarship in his time: by contrast, the short chapter on 'Anglo-Saxon Relics' is much less satisfactory. But the two lengthy chapters on ecclesiastical architecture, Celtic and medieval, are of high and enduring merit, and take their place along with Joseph Robertson's celebrated essay in the *Quarterly Review* as having laid the firm foundations upon which, at the end of the century, MacGibbon and Ross were to build. The portable relics of the Celtic and medieval churches are surveyed with easy competence, and then we have a penultimate chapter entitled 'Miscellaneous Antiquities', which carries us down to such objects as the thumbkins, jugs and branks which remind us of the darker side of Scottish life in the seventeenth century.

The final chapter of the work is a noble piece of philosophical writing, from which I shall venture to conclude this address by reading you one paragraph, wherein in language bold yet measured, and pervaded by his own habitual loftiness of thought, Sir Daniel Wilson asserts the claim of the young science of archaeology to be a worthwhile pursuit:

To the geologist one perfect example is a certain type of its species, and hence a complete geological collection is a conceivable thing; but it is not so with the labours of the archaeologist. He aims at recovering a clue to the esoteric no less than to the exoteric indices of past generations, and sees in each varied relic the product of human thought, invention, and intelligent design. Each human being of all the past ages had a personality and a destiny which give to whatever traces may be recoverable of him an interest for all time. Minutest variations may be the fruits and evidence of a mental labour never repeated; and each device of fancy or caprice may contain a clue to the character of the individual mind: a reflex, as it were, of the individuality and the psychical physiognomy of its originator. If we except, indeed, the treasures of the numismatist - which are, strictly speaking, a branch of written history - there are no true duplicates in the collections of the archaeologist. His researches are conducted in a boundless field, since their novelty is as inexhaustible as the phases of human thought; and, while thus reviewing his own study as a branch of human knowledge, and asserting for it its just place among the Sciences, he is little likely to overestimate the dignity of a pursuit which embraces within its aim the primal history of man.



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Triple portrait of Sir Daniel Wilson by Sir George Reid