

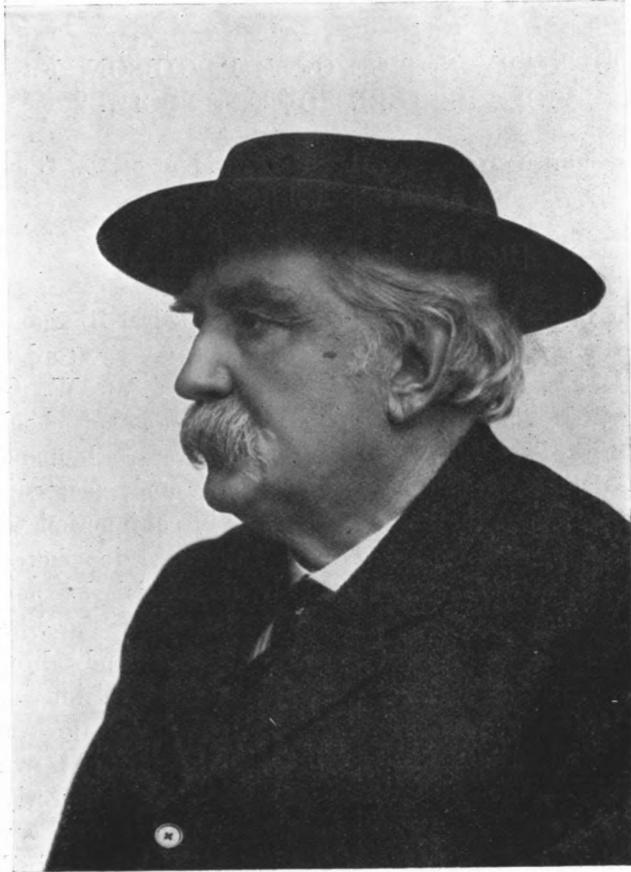
III.—OBITUARY NOTICE OF J. P. GIBSON, F.S.A., A  
VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE SOCIETY.

By GEORGE NEILSON, LL.D., late President of the Glasgow  
Archaeological Society.

[Read on the 31st of July, 1912.]

Born at Hexham, 4th January, 1838, died at Hexham, 22nd April, 1912, Mr. John Pattison Gibson leaves a record of considerable archaeological note. Son of Mr. W. W. Gibson, chemist in Hexham, educated first at the grammar school there and afterwards at the grammar school of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, he served his apprenticeship as a chemist and, succeeding his father, carried on the business (latterly in conjunction with his elder son, John) until his death. Interested in photography from about 1856, he became a highly distinguished exponent of its application to landscape and picturesque architecture, winning upwards of fifty medals at home and abroad, in particular that of the Paris International Exhibition in 1889. Reared in the shadow of the noble old priory church, he began the study of ecclesiastical and castellated architecture on which he gradually acquired a thorough knowledge, made greatly more definite by a quick eye, a keen memory and an unusual acquaintance with almost the whole of the historic structures in Northumberland and adjacent district. When Mr. Cadwallader J. Bates was working at the 'Border Holds,' Mr. Gibson accompanied him on a tour in 1884, photographing the fortresses and closely investigating their structure.

His fine series of photographs of Northumbrian antiquities—a standard pictorial record of the Northumberland he loved—coupled with his growing reputation as an archaeologist, brought



*J. P. Gibson*

THE LATE J. PATTISON GIBSON, F.S.A., A VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE SOCIETY.

him into contact not only with local workers in that field like Mr. John Clayton, of The Chesters, and Dr. J. Collingwood Bruce, but also with the annual stream of often-returning archaeological visitors chiefly attracted by the Roman Wall, at that time all but canonically accepted as the Wall of Hadrian. Dr. Bruce's view that the works were a unity and of Hadrian's time was then scarcely challenged, although there was always a restiveness and dissent which Mr. Gibson as late as 1892 shared, maintaining that Severus, not Hadrian, built the Wall and that the Vallum only was Hadrian's. He was keenly interested in the heterodoxy of *Per Lineam Valli* in 1891, the author of which subsequently had many opportunities of conference with him in long and delightful marches in all weathers over the moors and up and down the crags along the Vallum and the Murus, during which Mr. Gibson stereotyped his view that the Vallum was a road—a view he never renounced, though owning with customary frankness that no excavation had confirmed it. Regarding the Murus, his attitude showed the flux and reflux of opinion consequent on the diggings into the Vallum and the fresh explorations of the Murus, milecastles, and stations which after 1892 followed, as a sort of archaeological renaissance, the re-opening of the questions of the date, making, and purpose of the series of works whose main design was so self-evident, but the detailed evolution so baffling. While Dr. Bruce in ripe old age was still the master of the Wall, chancellor Ferguson, of Carlisle, had, in answer to a question as to the finality of the current opinion, said that there were 'young bloods' at Newcastle only waiting till Dr. Bruce died to awake the slumbering problems of the Wall. Not antagonism to him in any sense, however, but the truest homage to his much-honoured memory quickened the spirit of enquiry after his death in 1892, and prompted those numerous excavations and explorations, with consequent and ever more definite re-discussions, which splendidly reinforced the

store of fact and monument recovered, and have signally advanced the cause of British archaeology. In these two decades of strenuous and fruitful exploratory research Mr. Gibson took a leading part equally in actual excavation and superintendence and in successive stages of the long-drawn-out controversy on the full meaning of the works. Elsewhere archaeology pursues in calm the even tenor of its way: in Northumberland a potential argument lurks under every stone. Every fragment of inscription or pottery, every coin, every distinction of masonry in station or mile-castle, every joint in the Wall, every sign of successive occupation and rebuilding, was minutely canvassed for the long-sought decisive disclosure of the secret of the Murus. Curiously the positions of authorities were reversed. Our foremost Roman scholar, Mr. Haverfield, then not yet professor but already recognised as the academic master in the field, who had been on the side of Hadrian, now went roundly over to Severus as the builder of the Murus, explaining the turf wall at BIRDOSWALD (prophetically suspected by Mr. Bates) as the only remaining fragment of an original *murus cespitiarius* erected by Hadrian. Mr. Gibson changed sides, too, and leaving the ranks of Severus enlisted himself with characteristic fervour and vehemence among the adherents of Hadrian.

It was in 1883 that he joined the society. His early appearances at meetings and in its transactions were perhaps more prominently on his photographic than his archaeological basis, but he was from the first of invaluable service, not only as a leader and guide in excursions, but as a skilled critic of architectural history.

He had, even while Dr. Bruce was yet virtually the lone, though setting luminary, been himself a minor light on the course of debate and discovery on the Wall, but his interest had been more decisively focussed on the medieval churches and castles, and it was not long before 1892 that he began to con-

centrate upon the great Roman question, which is the master problem of Northumbrian antiquity. Mourning as he did the death of 'dear old Dr. Bruce,' as he affectionately styled him, he felt notwithstanding that his loss set free the whole position concerning the Murus and the Vallum, especially after the results obtained by excavation as regards the Vallum of Antonine in 1891. At first he could have little foreseen that in the discussions, diggings, and discoveries that lay ahead he was to be the most prominent figure, and that at the end of twenty years many would reckon him the true and worthy heir both of Mr. Clayton and Dr. Bruce in the work of research on the Wall. For he, almost as truly as Dr. Bruce, was to become its *genius loci*. His first notable find was in the summer of 1891, when a rabbit hole on the Nicks of Thirlwall gave him the clue to the existence of Mucklebank Wall turret. This definitely started him on the trail of exploration. He excavated the turret in 1892 and thenceforward till his death was seldom without a kindred task in hand or in prospect, whether in part on his own resources or as an executive member of the society. In 1894, 1895 and 1896 he assisted in excavating a large part of AESICA (Great Chesters), on which he drew up an elaborate illustrated report for the society. After this there was for some time a suspension of systematic digging, but there was no pause in discussion. In 1906 the conflict of archaeological thought was interestingly manifested at a meeting of the society in which professor Haverfield set forth his view of the 'Mural problem' in an address as vice-president, erecting a stone wall of Severus over Hadrian's wall of turf. Mr. Gibson, in moving the vote of thanks, met the theory of the paper with such point and resourcefulness as made the evening memorable. Confronting professor Haverfield's inferences with epigraphy, the geography of the earlier camps, and the correlation of the works as a whole, Mr. Gibson threw himself with all his force against the turf wall,

interpreting it as merely a local expedient of the Roman advance, and concluding that the Vallum connecting the camps preceded the Murus by only a short interval of time. Of course, such a discussion settles nothing, and Mr. Gibson scarcely did justice to the turf wall, but the occasion all the same admirably illustrated the peculiar service to archaeological science to be derived from minute local knowledge and special structural study when applied in criticism of more general academic historical theory. Academic theory in Great Britain he rightly or wrongly believed to be somewhat lacking in independence and originality and to have suffered from the dominance of German conclusions reached under conditions different from those of the Roman frontier in Britain.

Debate thus sharpening the spade for a renewal of digging, Mr. Gibson next year co-operated with Mr. F. Gerald Simpson, a colleague with whom he worked in peculiarly cordial sympathy on excavations made at that gentleman's private cost, on one of the Stanegate forts situated at Haltwhistle burn, close behind the Vallum. A joint report on the subject drew attention to structural elements not hitherto observed in any of the camps, and emphasised the group of circumstances pointing to a pre-Hadrianic date. Work pursued by Mr. Gibson and Mr. Simpson in 1910 on the Poltross-burn milecastle near Gilsland, also evoked a joint paper published in 1911 descriptive of the excavations and deducing the conclusion that the building both of the milecastle and the Great Wall, took place about 120 A.D. Yet more definite in its consequence was the exploration of the milecastle and three-turrets at High House, near BIRDOSWALD, in 1911. These High House diggings were made at sites of unique and crucial interest through being at a part of the Murus where the original but superseded piece of turf wall still remains, and where, therefore, the evidence of late date for Murus and milecastle might be expected to be definitive. The preliminary

report made by Mr. Simpson both for his colleague and himself has great significance as not only the latest pronouncement of moment on the Wall, but as the last word of Mr. Gibson marking the end and crown of all his excavation and study. Co-ordinating the evidence of all kinds it urges that structure, coins, and pottery unite in pointing to an equally early date of origin, to a unity of features with those of the Wall elsewhere and to the conclusion that that portion of the Murus was, like the rest of it, 'the work of Hadrian.' This then was Mr. Gibson's archaeological creed.

It would, however, be a mistake to convey the impression that he had even in his later years restricted himself to Roman antiquity. His early repute as a popular lecturer on the historical and picturesque aspects of Northumberland was won by qualities of enthusiasm and knowledge which made his company the more ripely instructive and entertaining the older he grew. His fondness for military history was in part a product of his long service as a volunteer. Joining the Hexham Rifle Corps in 1859 when the volunteer movement began, he rose to be captain, retired with the rank of major in 1892 and was an early recipient of the Victoria decoration. At the close of the great war in France he visited the battlefields, studied the tactics on the spot, and was in Paris itself during the Commune. His volunteering at home as well as his travels abroad immediately after the conclusion of the Franco-German campaign, and meeting and conversing with people who had taken part in the fighting, made him a truly formidable critic of amateur historians of battle. One of them he once told, laughing, that antiquaries took most interest in things they knew least about! Life for him abounded in interests to which his studies had added knowledge. On his deathbed, after a vigorous half-hour's talk entirely about the Wall, he told the writer of these notes that he had no complaint against fate: he had had a

happy life. Life he certainly enjoyed, and he shared its enjoyment handsomely. His friends were an infinite company, for he was as generous in hospitality as he was genial and helpful as a guide and companion to the pilgrims of knowledge who sought the shrines of the Wall. As a debater he was apt to be almost fierce in his maintenance of opinions he held dear; he could be ruthless in argumentative retort; but the antiquaries to a man knew and respected the true and strong spirit even in its bluntest mood. He could show touches of archaeological feud—it ran with the Border blood—but his appreciation of his fellows was hearty: not less so their appreciation of him. He was elected F.S.A. last year, and his place as an antiquarian scholar of quite superior grade was recognised by the honorary membership of the Glasgow Archaeological Society conferred upon him in 1908.

He was by preference an out-of-doors man, archaeologically choosing rather to hear the lark sing than the mouse cheep, more at home on the 'bent sae brown' with the long lines of Wall and Vallum reaching out in front of him than when poring over tomes in libraries or inscriptions in museums. A boxer and athlete in his youth, a sportsman and a shot all his life, he was equally, as antiquary, a Border fighter and wrestler, with all his heart in the not wholly mimic strife of the game. Although probably his chief value to archaeology came from his close investigation of the structures he knew—and he went to Rome to study some of them—it must not be forgotten that his library was both choice and extensive and that he scrutinized the authoritative texts and vouchers whether for Roman or medieval data with competent critical apprehension though without pretence to classical scholarship. For general literature he had no great leaning: yet taste in that direction was not wanting and is pleasantly reflected in the second generation—his third daughter, Elizabeth (Mrs. Cheyne) being voluminous

in graceful verse, and his younger son, Wilfrid, having already been accorded a remarkable place on the most ambitious plane of dramatic poetry realistically inspired by the tragedies of humble life.

J. P. Gibson's name is thus not likely to fade soon out of the annals of Northumberland. It scarcely needs to be said that the antiquarian circles of North England lose a power by his death. The portrait of him on p. 38 well suggests his stalwart soldierly frame, his vigour and individuality, and his vehement force of will. It shows the strong man who was behind the archaeologist. It fails a little to reveal the genial and even tender side of him, the humour that never failed, the warmth of heart, and the capacity for friendship which added so deep a personal attractiveness to his antiquarian sympathy.

There hangs, however, in a corner of my library, another likeness, an enlarged snapshot portrait of him standing on an angle turret of CILURNUM (The Chesters) expounding the camp—ardent, elate, with uplifted hands, the sunshine (occasionally seen even in Tynedale) just touching the eager face, as if to bring an outward glow to match that which came from within, through eyes alight with the enthusiasm of Roman archaeology. It is so that we of this generation of antiquaries shall delight to remember him.