

### III.—ROBERT SURTEES.

A CENTENARY APPRECIATION.

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[Read on 30th May, 1934.]

The year 1779 saw the birth of two eminent historical writers, John Hodgson, the author of the unfinished *History of Northumberland*, and Robert Surtees, the historian of the neighbouring county. Surtees was born in the South Bailey, Durham, on the 1st April, and was baptized in the church of St. Mary-le-Bow. His youth was spent at Mainsforth, and he received his early education at Kepier School, Houghton-le-Spring, where the master was the rev. William Fleming, of Queen's College, Oxford, and the usher a Mr. Wingfield. The school was one of the old-fashioned grammar schools, and here Surtees not only made great progress in the classics, but developed his passion for local history at a very early age. Among his school-fellows were John Pemberton of Sherburn Hall, and Bertram Mitford, afterwards Osbaldestone-Mitford. Pemberton has recorded how Surtees and he used to make excursions in search of old coins and other treasures, and how Mitford used to make drawings of them for him. The Surtees family usually spent part of every winter in York, and some of Robert's pocket-money was there spent in the purchase of Roman coins dug up by some gardener or other. Pemberton stayed with him at Mainsforth in 1790 or 1791, and remembered how during their rides together his friend poured forth stories of the history of the families and places they visited.

After leaving Houghton-le-Spring Surtees went, in 1793, to a tutor, Dr. Bristow of Neasden, in Kent. He entered Christ Church, Oxford, in 1796. The final classical honours examination, known familiarly to-day as "Greats," had not yet been established; but he seems to have read as much as most honours men of later days, and wrote good Latin and Greek verses with facility. He also occupied himself with a good deal of miscellaneous reading, and even at that early stage of his career was planning his future *History of Durham*. Surtees and Pemberton were both admitted B.A. in November, 1800, and became members of the Middle Temple. The former was never called to the Bar; indeed, instead of studying law he seems to have spent most of his time at the British Museum and at the College of Heralds. The position of attaché to one of the embassies was offered him, but he declined it.<sup>1</sup> His mother had died in 1797, and his father in 1802; so he left London in the latter year, settled down at Mainsforth for the rest of his days, and devoted himself to his favourite study. Two closely-written octavo volumes were filled by him, containing "*A Chronological List of the various successions of Princes in Modern Europe, with some short Historical Notices relating to the greater States.*" This work was dated 1799, and evidently had been originally intended for publication. Perhaps an acquaintance with Hallam may have had something to do with its inception. However that may have been, the long projected *History of Durham* entirely superseded researches into European history. With unresting enthusiasm he copied documents, inscriptions and coats of arms. He drove about the country in a gig gathering information, and his man complained that it was weary work; "we never could get past an auld beelding." The dean and chapter of Durham gave him, "in the most gallant way," as he puts it, ready access to their muniments. "Formerly," he noted in 1805, "no one was admitted without two prebendaries

<sup>1</sup> *Biographical Notice of Robert Surtees*, 1844.

with him: now the chapter clerk is thought sufficient." The chapter also gave him leave to take books away into the country. In return for their kindness he arranged their collection of coins, to which he made additions, besides presenting matrices and seals to the library. The coin collection had suffered from neglect for many years; the catalogue had not been brought up to date, and many specimens had been mislaid or lost.

On 21st June, 1810, Henry Phillpotts, one of the prebendaries, and afterwards bishop of Exeter, wrote to Surtees saying that there was an old Durham register which had been borrowed in the seventeenth century by the marquess of Newcastle, and had found a resting-place in the Bodleian library. The bishop had requested Phillpotts to ask Surtees to draw up a statement of any information he possessed as to the right of the Durham chapter to this manuscript, as they were anxious to get it back, and they believed that the vice-chancellor of Oxford would be reasonable on the matter. Phillpotts held Middleham as one of his pluralities from 1806-1810. Hence his connection with Surtees. Surtees evidently did what he was asked to do, and on 17th December, 1810, the bishop wrote to say that the register had come back. This was the register of bishop Kellaw.<sup>2</sup>

Some memoranda which Surtees made during the years 1804 and 1805 show that his health was very indifferent during that period. He was never a strong man, and had probably overtaxed his strength. He suffered from some kind of internal trouble, and was very anxious about himself. A sincere piety kept him from becoming too morbid; but he makes notes on his symptoms and their treatment, the changes in the weather, the deaths of friends and acquaintances, and their ages at the time of death. If the idea of marriage occurs to him, he writes gloomily that no woman would wish to marry "a sickly valetudinarian." However, he slackened his literary labours,

<sup>2</sup> Copies of these letters are in the possession of Mr. John Oxberry.

occupied himself more in outdoor employments like superintending agricultural improvements on his estate, and his health gradually improved. In 1807 he married Miss Anne Robinson, the daughter of an old family friend, Ralph Robinson of Middle Herrington, and the marriage proved an ideally happy one.

In 1806 he had begun a correspondence with Walter Scott on the subject of the Border ballads, in which Surtees took great delight. It was in his mind, when he had finished the *History of Durham*, to publish what he used to call his *Bishopric Garland*, a volume of ballads, written by himself, on the history and legends of the county of Durham. His wide knowledge of the Border songs, and some gift for writing light verse, enabled him to produce some very good imitations. The twelfth note to Scott's *Marmion* gives the text of *The Feud between the Riddleys and the Featherstones*, with the following explanation of its origin: "This old Northumbrian ballad was taken down from the recitation of a woman of eighty years of age, mother of one of the miners of Alston Moor, by an agent for the lead mines there, who communicated it to my friend and correspondent, R. Surtees Esq., of Mainsforth. She had not, she said, heard it for many years: but when she was a girl it used to be sung at the merry-makings, 'till the roof rung again.'" To it Surtees had added historical and linguistic notes. In reality the ballad was the composition of Surtees himself, who had never expected for a moment that it would be thus given to the world. He apparently felt that, as he had no wish to hurt his friend's feelings, he had better say nothing. He did say, however, in a letter to Scott dated 23rd May, 1808, "When you reprint *Marmion* say the ballad was composed by an agent, not the agent: as that would imply Colonel Beaumont's chief agent, of whose name even I am ignorant, and who probably knows nothing of the matter." Surtees, however, was able to find for the new edition of the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* numerous genuine

ballads, and for years the two friends kept up a learned correspondence on Border history, legends and genealogy; and when Scott was editing the papers of sir Ralph Sadler (published in two volumes in 1809), Surtees sent him notes and additional information. Many of the letters which passed between them have been preserved. They show a certain amount of the formality of the age—"Dear Sir," is the usual mode of address—though after some years Scott frequently dropped into "My dear Surtees," and curiously enough, always seems to have believed that his friend's name was Richard. Two letters to Scott tell of the progress of the great *History*. In 1810 Surtees says, "I am now working at intervals, for my case is different from yours, and if I am consumed by rust, instead of being worn out by perpetual motion, the loss will be trifling."<sup>3</sup> Writing again in December, 1811, he tells Scott that he is "toiling literally through thick clay, on the opposite and far less interesting side of the county, on the eastern coast," and says, "I am sometimes ready to exclaim :

"Hence, loathed, dull Topography  
 To Tom à Hearne, whom Matron Alma bore,  
 By Cherwell's sedgy shore;  
 Hence, and seek out some Abbey's mouldering pile,  
 And, midst each cloister dim and long-drawn aisle,  
 With tattered 'scutcheons hung and banners dreary,  
 Some misspelt name or uncouth form explore,  
 With plodding pains and dullness—never weary."

As for Romance, he adds, "I always adore her. But she pleases me most in her Caledonian hunting dress—

'Tricked and frounc'd, God wot!  
 As she would hunt with Walter Scott!'"

"I am loath," he adds, "to trouble you with nothing but my own nonsense, generated amidst the muddy chaos of a County History."

<sup>3</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 109.

Surtees received help in his work from many sources. Fortunately for him, his means enabled him to employ people to copy documents for him, and he was thus saved a certain amount of drudgery. He engaged "Tom Bird," and at a later date another draughtsman named Green, to make sketches. It was the time of the Napoleonic wars, and one of these, probably Green, while sketching at Hartlepool was arrested on a charge of being a French spy. The later volumes of the *History* owed much to the artistic work of Mr. Edward Blore.

Many of the gentry of the county were interested in the design of writing its history on a large scale. John George Lambton, who managed to combine radical principles with dignified aloofness, not to say aristocratic haughtiness, wrote offering Surtees the use of a manuscript in his possession, "considering it to be the duty of every gentleman in the county to assist you as far as possible in so laborious and praiseworthy an undertaking." Not all the gentry, however, were so willing; there were occasions when the strings of influence had to be pulled before documents could be brought out of their musty hiding-places. Surtees was fortunate in his friends. There was the headmaster of Richmond grammar school, Mr. James Tate, afterwards canon of St. Paul's, a man whom Sidney Smith described as "dripping with Greek." A friendship with Reginald Heber, afterwards bishop of Calcutta, was continued from their Oxford days. Sir Cuthbert Sharp, the historian of Hartlepool and of the Northern Rising of 1569, was among the frequent guests at Mainsforth. He helped Surtees a great deal, and at the time of his death was busy on some Brancepeth deeds for him. A little pamphlet published in 1844, entitled *A Biographical Notice of Robert Surtees of Durham*, is believed to have been Sir Cuthbert's work.<sup>4</sup>

Near Mainsforth lived William and George Taylor, who were tenants of a farm at Bishop Middleham, close

<sup>4</sup> *Mémoires*, p. 221.

by: George, after some years, removed to Bishop Auckland, and in 1815 retired from farming, and gave himself up to literary work until he died in 1851. Though they seldom saw one another, Surtees and George Taylor kept up a correspondence which was only ended by the former's death. George Taylor, who was the father of sir Henry Taylor of the Colonial Office, the author of *Philip van Artevelde*, performed the pious duty of preparing for the press the fourth volume of Surtees' book, and prefixed to it the *Memoir*, which was afterwards revised by James Raine and published in a separate volume by the Surtees Society in 1852.

Snow Hall, near Gainford, formerly the property of the Raine family, had in 1758 passed to Timothy Wright, who bequeathed it to Richard Sherwood, a surgeon of Staindrop. The last named had a son, Thomas, who became a doctor of medicine, a busy practitioner at Bishop Auckland, and an earnest student of local history. In his first volume<sup>5</sup> Surtees speaks of Dr. Sherwood's "early and valued assistance," without which the work "would never have been undertaken." The doctor had a gifted son, Ralph, who was educated at the university of Edinburgh for the medical profession, but threw up excellent prospects for a poor career on the stage. It was a great blow to Dr. Sherwood, and the death of the son and a daughter brought his life to an unhappy close in 1830.<sup>6</sup> A volume of letters, chiefly to Ralph Sherwood, preserved at Mainsforth, contains several letters written to him by Surtees. The great friendship, of course, was with the father. Some of the latter's long letters, closely written and packed with information, still remain. He reported in 1808 the discovery and destruction of some Roman work at Binchester, probably a hypocaust. He collected books, manuscripts, coins, information respecting pedigrees, anything in fact which would be of use to his friend in

<sup>5</sup> Vol. I, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Fordyce, *County Palatine of Durham*, 1857, II, pp. 134-135.

his researches. There is an amusing epistle, undated, but almost certainly written early in 1808, which runs :

“ Right trusty and right well-beloved Cousin we greet you and shall be extremely happy to see you, Mrs. Surtees, and Miss Robinson on Tuesday. We will dine at three, but come as soon as you can that we may shew the Ladies the castle and the park completely. Mrs. Sherwood when I read her your humorous epistle, said as most wives, I believe, do on these occasions, ‘ Tuesday, dear me, we can get nothing for dinner on that day,’ but I soon gave her to understand that Antiquaries delight more in viewing a green coin than in tasting even the green fat of turtle. Take, therefore, what we can procure, and if the Chief of Redworth is at home I will enlist him of our party. And as the Duke of Cleveland used to conclude, ‘ This is all at present.’

“ THOS. SHERWOOD.”<sup>7</sup>

Another member of the learned group of friends and fellow-workers was the rev. John Hodgson. A letter from Surtees to Hodgson, dated from Mainsforth, 29th April, 1812, enables us to fix the beginning of their friendship :

“ I feel myself much indebted to you for your kind communication, and shall be happy in any opportunity of your personal acquaintance, not only on account of the valuable assistance you promise me, but from the great pleasure I have derived from your poems. I visited Lanchester for the first time last autumn with your volume in my hand, and shall be glad to consider the antiquities of Jarrow under your direction. My knowledge of Roman antiquities is very trifling, and I have had few opportunities of visiting stations, Binchester being the only one with which I am at all familiar.”<sup>8</sup>

In several of the volumes of his great history of Northumberland there are references to help from Surtees, not only in the way of information, but also of a pecuniary nature.

Perhaps the most intimate friend of Robert Surtees was the rev. James Raine, the historian of North Durham; who became second master at Durham School in 1812, and was introduced to Surtees in the North Bailey

<sup>7</sup> Copy in the possession of Mr. B. Surtees Raine.

<sup>8</sup> *Memoirs of the rev. John Hodgson*, I, p. 84.

that year by Mr. George, a minor canon of the cathedral. Raine fell into the habit of spending his holidays and Sundays at Mainsforth. The two made many historical and archæological excursions in company. In September, 1816, they visited the Roman camp at Lanchester, "and deposited in its ruins, duly sealed in a glass bottle, an inscription upon parchment written *more Romano*, and containing many interesting particulars which to future antiquaries will be invaluable." This is Raine's own statement.<sup>9</sup>

In 1819 they went together on a tour of the Border country, and it was at this time that Surtees first met James Hogg, with whom, however, he had had correspondence, and to whom he had been very kind a long time before this. In a letter to Ralph Sherwood, dated 6th February, 1818, Surtees said, "I buy all that Hogg writes or shall write during our joint lives."<sup>10</sup> On this expedition Raine and Surtees spent a pleasant day at Abbotsford as the guests of sir Walter Scott. Formality of address was dropped between the two friends. Letters from Surtees begin "Good Maistre Raine," "Myster James Rayne," "Mag<sup>r</sup> Raine," or even "Pluvialis Iacobe." Raine tells a story how Surtees severely injured a finger of his left hand while pruning some trees. We have already seen him a little anxious about his health: on this occasion he "was nervous, fidgety and restless, and made every one uncomfortable around him. He ran from room to room, and no one could keep him quiet." However, Dr. Sherwood came over, and all was well. "One who now liveth at Crook Hall" wrote:

"The Doctor so fine went to Mainsforth to dine.  
Invited or not, cannot say.  
He found the poor Squire with his finger on fire.  
'Oh, Doctor, come help me I pray.'

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<sup>9</sup> *Memoir*, p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Letter at Mainsforth.

He opened his bags and he pull'd out his rags.  
 He's the man, Sir, for cerates and salves.  
 He cures cough and wheeze, he phisicks all Teesdale.  
 He never does things, man, by halves.

With port wine and bark he soon hit the mark.  
 He settled the hash of the flame.  
 Then homeward he hi'ed like a peacock in pride,  
 To tell all the news to his dame."

Similar verses were printed in a pamphlet without title; but ending with the words, "Here endith y<sup>e</sup> Dysshe of Sottleties." They reveal a little band of busy, mutually helpful scholars, and friends, with their chaffing nonsense rhymes, which only such men could write, and they only could write because of their intimate friendship.

The first volume of *The History of the County Palatine of Durham* appeared in 1816, the second in 1820, and the third in 1823. At his death the fourth volume was still unfinished—most of Darlington Ward was still untouched; but a portion was in type, and had been printed under the supervision of the author; and there were a few pages in the hands of the printers. In 1840 this fourth volume was published in its imperfect condition, and Darlington had to wait till 1854 to find its historian in Longstaffe.

This immense work in four large volumes was described by the author's biographer and friend, George Taylor, as "a farrago in folio." One cannot help being struck by the vast knowledge; the regard for exact truth, and the patient research which have gone to its making. Written in the old, leisurely, grand style, it contains general discussions, verses (often of Surtees' own composition), characterizations of persons, graphic descriptions of scenery, and passing reflections, which the less discursive historian of to-day would omit, though he would make his book less pleasant to read. That later research has been able to correct some of his statements goes without saying; but there is comparatively little to correct. In spite of the publication of part of the *Victoria County History*,

no student of the history of the county can dispense with Surtees' monumental work.

We have a description of his methods. He used to pace the gravel walk in the beautiful garden at Mainsforth, mentally putting his material in shape. Then he would sit down in his study and write out hurriedly the result of his meditations, rather in the form of scribbled notes, with many abbreviations. When manuscript was needed for the press he extended the abbreviations, wafered the pages together and sent them off. Documents were copied for him by an amanuensis, and were inserted at the proper places. The printers must have found his methods difficult, at times, one imagines.

In the preface to the first volume of the *History of Durham* grateful reference is made to the help derived from "the unwearied zeal and indefatigable industry of the rev. James Raine." In 1816 Raine wrote to Ralph Sherwood saying that the dean and chapter had given permission to publish the records in their possession relative to Northhamshire, Islandshire and Bedlingtonshire. Every facility of access had been given to him, and Mr. Surtees was at full liberty to transfer the material transcribed from the Treasury for his intended history of that district. Surtees and Raine agreed that while the *History of North Durham* might be purchased as a distinct publication, it was to be considered as constituting in reality a portion of the *History of Durham*, and it was therefore published on a uniform scale of type, paper and price.<sup>11</sup>

Surtees took a great interest in the foundation of the university of Durham, and was one of the early benefactors of its library. At the time of his death he was thinking out plans for the establishment of the annual award of a gold medal to the undergraduate who showed the most proficiency in some subject to be decided on. He was urged to enter parliament, and bishop Barrington even offered him a prebendal stall at Durham if he would only

<sup>11</sup> See prospectus to Raine's *North Durham*.

take holy orders. He was old-fashioned, and strenuously opposed a scheme for running a railway line through his property. Nevertheless, the bill for its establishment passed through parliament; but with some modifications; so that it turned out to be less of a nuisance to him than he expected. He was a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, and was elected a member of our own society on 2nd June, 1813. He made some gifts to its collections; but otherwise took no active part in its affairs.

As one looks at the four massive folios of his *History of the Palatinate of Durham*, the first of which was written twice before publication, and as one thinks of the many large volumes of notes and extracts in his possession at the time of his death, written by his own hand, one marvels at the industry of the man. He worked to the end; in the very last week of his life he was compiling notes on Charles Neville, the last earl of Westmorland, who was attainted in 1569. He had planned, when his great history was finished, to publish a volume of Northumberland pedigrees, with engravings of castles and peel towers; but it was not to be.

At Mainsforth he lived the life of a country gentleman, finding much to occupy him in the study of botany and geology, in agricultural experiments, and in gardening. A lovable person, with a quiet humour, he was a good landlord, and a friend to his poorer neighbours, whose lives he brightened by manifold acts of kindness. He did much to make comfortable the last days of sir Thomas Conyers, the last of the Sockburn house, who had been forced to take refuge in Chester-le-Street workhouse at the age of seventy-two. A man of deep piety, Surtees was an earnest student of the scriptures, and habitually read both the Old and New Testaments in Greek. He delighted in the ancient classics, and had a wide knowledge even of comparatively unknown Greek authors. He possessed an extensive library: Scott said he knew of no such collection of books in any house of equal fortune in Scotland. He

loved children and animals, especially dogs. Referring to a portrait of Scott published in the fourth edition of *The Lady of the Lake*, he wrote to him, "I much desire to know the name of your friend who looks so happy on your knee, and whose introduction in the print, along with his master, pleases all my dog-sympathies more than I can express."<sup>12</sup> His affection for all living creatures was such that it was said that he even hated to destroy a wasps' nest. He disliked artificiality of manners, and so to some people he seemed somewhat unpolished. Even Scott, writing to Southey in 1810, said, "He is an excellent antiquary, some of the rust of which study has clung to his manners; but he is good-hearted, and you would make the summer eve short between you." He also detested great functions. On the 3rd October, 1827, bishop Van Mildert gave a great dinner in Durham castle to a hundred and forty persons, among whom were the duke of Wellington and sir Walter Scott. The description of the scene as given in Lockhart's *Life of Scott* is well known. The next day the bishop entertained two hundred distinguished guests at Sunderland, and Scott was again present. Surtees refused to go to either.

He was never a robust man, and his health caused some anxiety to his friends from 1830 onwards. He died on the 11th February, 1834, at the early age of fifty-five years. His monument in Bishop Middleham church was designed by his friend, Edward Blore. John Hodgson wrote to James Raine on the 17th February, "An honourable and a great spirit has fled from among us. I have for the last two years from week to week been promising myself the pleasure of spending a few days at Mainsforth, and it was certainly neither indolence nor selfishness; but a much harder master than both that kept me prisoner here, and from the joyous and delightful society of Surtees. I wish I could have written some tribute to his memory; but my feeble spirit is unable to encounter so great a task. . . .

<sup>12</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 100.

Pray tell me how far he has advanced in printing another volume. If it would pay you for doing so, you should go on with the work."<sup>13</sup>

"If it will pay"—the student who pursues historical research for its own sake cannot, as a rule, expect to make financial profit. Surtees received nearly £800 from the nobility and gentry of the county of Durham towards the expense of the illustrations in the three volumes published during his lifetime. But the book was produced on a very large scale. The author spared no expense in commissioning copyists and artists, and in travelling about for information. It was lavishly illustrated, with an abundance of beautiful specimens of copperplate engraving—the work of Caroline Watson, Scriven, Finden, Blore, Le Keux, Cooke, Hollis, Bromley, Pye, Miller, Byrne, Cooper and other masters of the art. All this was very expensive. A single engraving in Hodgson's *Northumberland* cost £15,<sup>14</sup> and the bill for two others came to £43 8s. 8d.<sup>15</sup> From purchases of land, enfranchisement of leasehold property, and from the large sums expended in the publication of his splendid volumes, Mr. Surtees' debts at the period of his death greatly exceeded the amount of his personal property.<sup>16</sup> At his death his library, his pictures, his manuscripts, and his collections at Mainsforth had to be sold for the sake of his widow. Fortunately, what became of considerable sections of the library was known, and it is due to the care of the late sir Conyers Surtees that the majority of the books of Robert Surtees have again found a resting-place in their original home.

On the 14th April, 1834, Raine wrote to Hodgson, "You must, if by any means it be possible, join a few of Mr. Surtees' friends at Mr. Allan's lodgings, next door to

<sup>13</sup> *Memoir of John Hodgson*, by J. Raine, II, pp. 331-332.

<sup>14</sup> Raine, *Life of Hodgson*, II, p. 96.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>16</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 196.

the coach manufactory in New Elvet, on Friday morning next at twelve o'clock. I shall stand in great need of your advice and support. Come as soon in the morning as you can. At eleven you will find me in the Dean and Chapter Library. . . . I most confidently expect your attendance at a meeting to promote an object which will eventually, as I hope, reflect not less credit to its favourers than to the memory of him under whose banner they associate. I think you owe it to poor Surtees to be stopped by no ordinary engagement. . . . Mrs. Surtees wishes me to finish the fourth volume of the *Hist. of Durham*, and I have engaged so to do. I shall be very glad to hear from Mr. Swinburne, for whom our lamented friend had a very great respect, and to whom he was under great obligations."<sup>17</sup> The meeting referred to was held, and the Surtees Society was formed, which has published, during the past hundred years, close on a hundred and fifty volumes.

At Mainsforth Hall his letters, his books, the pictures on the walls painted by his father, the garden path he used to pace as he meditated on his great work, the tree planted by his friend, Walter Scott, the original of the silhouette which appears in the *Memoir* (the only attempt at a portrait of him we have), all are there. There, too, is the memory of the scholarly soldier the love of whose life it was to continue his work. That work abides in the hearts of all who love the history, lore and legend of the north country. The ancient diocese has been truly fortunate in having such historians as that distinguished trio John Hodgson, James Raine and Robert Surtees.

<sup>17</sup> I am indebted for this extract to Mr. John Oxberry, who copied it in 1922 from the original, then in the possession of Mr. J. G. Hodgson, grandson of the rev. John Hodgson.