



LT.-COL. G. R. B. SPAIN, C.M.G., F.S.A.

[See p. 281.]

MEMOIR

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George Redesdale Brooker Spain (frontispiece) was born at Horsley in Redesdale on 23rd June 1877, the second son of George Spain, then a resident of Newcastle but formerly of Hacklinge, Kent; he married in 1910 Miss Norah Elizabeth Smiles, of Belfast, by whom he had two daughters; and on 12th October 1961 he died at Newcastle upon Tyne, where he had lived for many years. His ashes were interred at Holy Trinity Church, Horsley, in the heart of the countryside in which he was born, and which he had long since made his own.

He became a member of the Society on 30th January 1901, and was appointed a Curator of the Museums in 1921, a position he held till 1937. Elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1924, he served as Vice-President of our Society from 1934-1940, and in 1940-41 he filled with distinction the office of President.

George Spain lived a life full of interests on many fronts, in which however three main themes were pre-eminent—his livelihood in land agency, his devotion to volunteer service as a soldier, and his love of antiquity.

Educated at Eastbourne College, in 1906 he succeeded his father as land agent to Lord Northbourne, and became responsible for the latter's extensive interests both in Jarrow and in Redesdale. This position he held for the rest of his active life, conducting his business from an office in Mosley Street, which between the wars became a regular clearing-house for archaeological intelligence, available to all, without distinction of age or learning, who had a concern for the antiquities of Northumberland and Durham.

His career as a volunteer soldier this is not the place to

recount in detail, but a few landmarks cannot be omitted. He joined the 3rd Volunteer Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers, as a Second Lieutenant in 1898; and in the South African War with the rank of Captain commanded, 1901-1902, the 4th Volunteer Service Company N.F. For these services he was awarded the Queen's Medal with five clasps, and with his comrades was voted an Honorary Freeman of the City of Newcastle. After the conversion of the old Volunteers to the Territorial Army he was promoted, in 1912, to command the 6th Battalion of his regiment. He had the honour of taking his battalion into its first action in France in 1915, and fought in the second battle of Ypres and the first battle of the Somme, being created C.M.G. in 1916, and twice mentioned in despatches. He retired from active service in 1918.

Spain took little part in the affairs of the Society till after the war of 1914-1918. His first interest was in the Society's collections, and after becoming a Curator he was prominent at the monthly meetings of the Society in describing new accessions and discoveries, and meticulous in recording them in *Proceedings*, often with his own admirable sketches, to the lasting benefit of later workers. Nevertheless some of his most remarkable services as curator passed largely unnoticed. It could hardly have been otherwise, owing to his great modesty, and to a certain reluctance to publish his identifications. In fact, at a time when the extensive lapidary collections of the Society—other than stones of the Roman period—were scattered unregarded and unrecorded in endless holes and corners throughout the Keep and Black Gate, Spain spent untold hours in research on this material, and succeeded in achieving a truly remarkable series of identifications of ill-recorded gifts extending over the whole period of the Society's existence. The results he set down systematically, again accompanied by his admirable thumb-nail sketches, in a special note-book; and this he made freely available to anyone who in his opinion had shown sufficient interest to deserve it.

He was, besides, an ardent collector in the Society's interests, with a keen nose for a private collection; and many of the accessions which in his day appeared to have fallen from the skies were in fact due to his foresight and tenacity. The same flair and energy went into his activities as a recruiter of new members. No one could have had a sharper instinct to detect a latent interest in antiquity; nor was he slow off the mark. The slenderest of acquaintance, the barest of pretexts, would land the most improbable personalities with a form of application for membership.

His other major contribution to the work of the Society was in the field of Roman studies. On the formation of the North of England Excavation Committee in April 1924 he became its first and only honorary secretary, continuing to serve in that capacity till the Committee suspended its activities on the outbreak of war in 1939. During that period he wrote the six reports published by the Committee on its work from 1924-1938, with full references to the more detailed accounts of its investigations in *Archæologia Aeliana* or *Proceedings*, several of which, outstanding for their accuracy, were by his own hand. His presentation of the work done in 1928 is particularly noteworthy.

Spain's main monument in this field, and probably the best of all his published work, was the Roman section of volume XIII (1930) of the *Northumberland County History*, a magistral account of the Roman Wall from Wallsend to Rudchester Burn, with a catalogue of all inscribed and sculptured stones found in the sector—in effect a richly illustrated monograph of 82 quarto pages. Here he was indeed breaking fresh ground, for nothing of the kind had been attempted since planned excavation had outmoded Bruce's description of the surface remains in 1867. This systematic survey was based directly on the work of the North of England Excavation Committee, where F. G. Simpson had naturally taken the lead in the matter of excavation; but Spain had himself followed every detail with the closest attention. And although in the catalogue of stones

R. G. Collingwood had helped on the finer points of epigraphy, no man at that time had a more intimate knowledge than had Spain of the appearance, condition, and history of the stones themselves. With the exception, therefore, of R. C. Bosanquet's pages on the Roman Bridge, the whole of the writing of the section fell to Spain, and it may well stand as a memorial of his eagerness, his accuracy, and the lucidity of his style.

His interest in the work of the Committee continued unabated till the outbreak of war, and during this period he made in particular two further contributions which on account of their permanent value should not go unnoticed. In 1934 he published an account of investigations directed to establishing the course of the Wall in Westgate, Newcastle upon Tyne (AA 4, XI, 227-233); while in 1937 he drew attention to the survival and significance of the original survey for the military road from Newcastle to Carlisle, from which Nathaniel Hill engraved his map of 1749, and which had been preserved among the Allgood family papers at Nunwick (AA 4, XIV, 17-21).

Such were the main areas of his activity on behalf of the Society, but his interest in antiquity ranged wider still. A distinguished collector both of tokens and medals, he had in addition formed an extensive collection of topographical prints of Northumberland and Newcastle; he was an authority on maps, especially those of the North-East; and he was a Fellow of the Huguenot Society. He applied himself also to the records of prehistoric finds in Northumberland, making for his own use a complete gazetteer of such discoveries based on an exhaustive search through the whole of the transactions of all local societies, all general histories of the county or of any part of it, and the works of all the local chroniclers such as Sykes, Fordyce, Richardson and Welford. This hand-list, the product of an incredible labour, was used as the starting-point for the classified lists of finds printed in the prehistoric sections of volumes XIV and XV of the *Northumberland County History*.

No bare recital of his activities, however, could give the least clue to George Spain's personality. He was the gayest of companions. Wherever he went gusts of laughter would fill the room. His *joie-de-vivre* seemed unquenchable. He combined an entirely boyish sense of fun with a whimsical turn of humour, often directed against himself, of the most sophisticated quality. Above all he revelled in the ridiculous, which he could find in any personality or any situation, however unpromising. Just to sit back and listen to him was a constant and unqualified delight. An inimitable raconteur, his stories lost nothing by the air of naïve surprise with which every turn in his tale was accompanied. And he was no less accomplished with the written than with the spoken word; when he felt in the vein *Punch*, the *Cornhill Magazine*, and other national periodicals were glad to accept his witty contributions. But the fun was always friendly, and though he might guy anything or anybody, he was never known to say a word that could be taken as in the least unkind.

In latter years the deafness which had bothered him for some time past so far increased that he no longer cared to attend meetings of the Society. And still he kept his spirits up. His series of Oriental Nursery Rhymes written out in clear on the backs of postcards, to the mild scandal of any who might stop to read, showed to the end the old form undimmed, and enlivened the Christmas festivities of the more fortunate of his friends. He had led with verve and gusto a life of uncommon achievement.

John D. Cowen

