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JOHN COWEN

A Memoir

John David Cowen was born on 16th November 1904, son of J. E. Cowen of Minsteracres, and died on 16th February 1981. His life was divided, like ancient Gaul, into three unconnected parts—except that he welded them into a logical unity: banker, archaeologist and soldier. But for us in this Society it is his record as an archaeologist, and his quality as a generous and stimulating friend, that calls

for fullest appreciation in the present memoir; after all, his archaeological career began before, and outlasted, his banking, while his service in the Northumberland Hussars from 1929, and through the war years in which he served in North Africa, Sicily, France and Germany, winning the Military Cross in 1943, was for him only an interlude from his interests in research. His published work was mainly in this Society's *Archaeologia Aeliana*¹ and *Proceedings*, and in the *Proceedings* of the Prehistoric Society; but it is right to record his services to the Society of Antiquaries of London too. He had been elected F.S.A. in 1934; he served on its finance committee from 1950 to 1964, in the latter years becoming its treasurer; holding that honorary office for seven years, he succeeded in putting the society's finances in immeasurably better order.

Of the honours which came to him he was perhaps proudest of becoming an honorary Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland; but it would not be right to pass over the award of the D.C.L. conferred on him, in recognition (one likes to think) of his scholarship as well as of his benefactions to King's College and the University of Newcastle upon Tyne.

He was educated at Rugby and Hertford College, Oxford, taking Greats in 1928. In the Society's *Proceedings* for that year it is recorded that he described the Roman altars from Housesteads, then at Minsteracres, when one of our outdoor meetings visited there, and on 25th July he was elected a member. Before the end of the year he assisted in the labelling of some of the prehistoric exhibits in the Black Gate Museum, and with Parker Brewis he presented a Bronze Age cinerary urn from Ryton. In 1929, he provided a catalogue of the British section of the Society's collection of coins; but his ultimate over-riding interest in prehistoric bronzes came into

the field in 1930, when he presented a typescript supplement to Brewis's catalogue of bronze implements; his notes on recent research in the Black Gate Museum, particularly dealing with prehistoric material, revealed the quality of his detective work on labels and donation lists, and he added notes on an unrecorded jet necklace of the Kyloe type from Northumberland, on bronze bowls in the Society's possession and—foreshadowing his interest in the post-Roman period—on an Anglo-Saxon hanging bowl from a burial of the pagan period in Northumberland. The active investigations thus begun were continued by a series of papers printed in *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4th series, VI, VIII–X and XII–XIII; it was no surprise that in 1933 he was elected one of the Society's curators, at first as colleague of Colonel Spain, and from 1939 as Senior Curator, backed up by Mr William Bulmer.

The outbreak of war in 1939 brought a long break in his active work for the Society, which was to be resumed only briefly in 1946, when he was elected one of our Vice-Presidents, and contributed a paper on a prehistoric grave at West Lilburn. But his transfer to London, and to an increasing responsibility at the head office of Barclay's Bank, made it impossible for him to continue his researches locally, though in 1966–8 he accepted our highest honour, as President of the Society, a role which he filled actively. Yet his base in London gave him the opportunity for further investigations, appropriately published in the Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society: bronze swords were now his very special interest, with preliminary studies printed in *PPS* 17 and 18, and further important papers in *PPS* 31 (showing how widely he had travelled in France, to examine specimens in museums or in private collections), 32 and 33; at p. 423 in the latter volume he closed his acknowledgements as follows: "There remains one general obligation that I wish particularly to discharge in the present context. To the enthusiasm, the stimulating talk, and above all the early encouragement of the late W. Parker Brewis of Newcastle upon Tyne, I owe more than can be expressed in print." (John Cowen was not the only younger man to owe such gratitude, as I can vouch.) His investigations had been brought before a wider archaeological public by an important study, entitled "An introduction to the history of the bronze flange-hilted sword in South Germany and the adjacent territories", printed in the 36th *Pericht* of the Römisch-Germanische Kommission, pp. 52–155, with 22 plates; it has stood the test of time as an epoch-making survey.

He had been elected President of the Prehistoric Society in 1966, and his presidential address in 1969 (*PPS* 35, 1–11), deserves to be read and remembered, not merely because of his emphasis that he was still an amateur, "in the most stringently literal sense an autodidact, and proud of it", but because of his wise words on the needs for prehistorians to keep in touch with amateurs like himself, and to avoid making their findings too full of jargon. Jargon is the last thing that one can find in any of his archaeological writings: however involved the investigation, the clarity of his exposition marks a high standard that too few of us have ever managed to approach—and that clarity and indeed the effervescence of his conversation as well as of his writings, will remain for me one of the fondest memories of the friend that I first met more than half a century ago.

For several years before his death he was dogged by illness which he bore with

great fortitude. Our deepest sympathy goes to his wife Rhoda, and their three children.

Eric Birley

NOTE

¹ These papers, published in *Arch. Ael.* from 1929 to 1967, are too numerous to list. Ed.