



JOHN PHILIPSON  
1910–1995

THROUGHOUT our Society's long life, it has had cause for gratitude to many individuals, but few if any have done more for it than John Philipson, whose death on the 28th December 1995 has robbed us of one of our most prominent members. He served us as Secretary from 1957 to 1961, became a Vice-President in 1965 and President in 1973. He edited *Archaeologia Aeliana* from 1962 until his death, having played a leading part in that publication's preparation for some considerable time before formally assuming that office. It is to his devoted and unsparing work as editor that we owe the continued high standing of our principal publication. He combined an insistence on the highest standards of exposition with an unfailing helpfulness towards contributors. Apart from his work as an officer of the Society, we are going to miss John Philipson for his role over many years as a constant source of wise counsel and good advice. In addition to his contribution to the life of our Society, he made a significant con-

tribution to other aspects of this region's cultural activities. The Literary and Philosophical Society also knew him as a long-serving and devoted officer, and there too he continued to provide help and good advice for many years after he had relinquished the Presidency of that Society. He was much in demand there to the end of his life as someone who could be relied upon to give specialist advice and help in relation to that Society's publications as well as those of our own organization. His contribution to the region's cultural life was recognized by the award of an honorary degree by the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in 1981.

It is not necessary here to sketch the family background from which he sprang, since that has already been admirably chronicled by Olive Checkland in her study *Sobriety and Thrift*. John Philipson gave Mrs. Checkland much help during the writing of this book. (Any members interested in the local history of Tyneside who have not read this succinct account are strongly advised to repair this defi-

ciency.) John Philipson was born on 2nd. January 1910. He was educated at Dame Allan's School where he was senior prefect, house captain and football captain. His headmaster described him as "an excellent character" who was not only "a scholar of very considerable ability" but also "a gentleman and a pleasing personality". He went on to study at St. Catharine's College, Cambridge, where his tutors formed a similarly high opinion of his character and ability. He graduated in June 1931. At first he had no inclination to enter the family business, perhaps because many of his Cambridge friends had decided to seek careers in the Civil Service. He qualified to join the tax inspectorate with little difficulty, and for a couple of years he taught at Richmond Grammar School while awaiting a suitable appointment. He was a successful teacher there, winning golden opinions for his contribution to the school's scholarly and sporting activities.

Then his career took a different line. Filling in a holiday period by a "temporary" stint with his family firm, he discovered that it was much to his taste after all. Instead of taking up a civil service post (he was offered an appointment in the tax office at Hackney in November 1933), he decided to follow in his father's footsteps. He was dispatched to London to gain experience in the technical aspects of photo-engraving and kindred matters, and then returned to work in Newcastle. He served the company for more than forty years, and even after 1975, when he embraced partial retirement, he continued to put some time in at the office. In addition to this primary occupation, he was active in other commercial activities, notably in his work as a director and then chairman of E. and J. Richardson, Ltd., of the Elswick Leather Works, one of Newcastle's oldest established firms. He also developed a prominent role in the work of his national professional organization, the Federation of Master Engravers, especially during the 1950s and 1960s. During the Second World War he worked hard for the Ministry of Information. In 1937 he married Mary Richardson, inaugurating many years of happy family life. They

had five children, and lived for the most part at various Newcastle addresses, although in 1954 he bought Hernspeth House, the old doctor's house at Harbottle, which served as a base for his untiring interests in many aspects of the Northumberland countryside.

In Newcastle John Philipson continued in the tradition, established long ago by men like Thomas Hodgkin and Wigham Richardson, of successful business men who also contrived to achieve significant scholarly distinction in their chosen fields. When excavating (with considerable technical skill deliberately acquired for this purpose) an illicit still in the Northumbrian countryside, he could recruit timber merchants from among his commercial acquaintance to contribute an expert opinion on the fragments of wood among his finds. His own researches over the years included a diverse range of topics, including the dating of stoneware mineral water bottles, the Newcastle Corpus Christi plays, Coquetdale fishing songs, the history of the North East Quaker families, the forgery of French *assignats*, and the archaeology of drove roads, corn drying kilns and illicit stills. He was a great lover of books, not only as an inveterate reader, but also as a skilled bookbinder and an expert on the manufacture and use of paper, inks and similar items. In all of these activities he evinced qualities of perception and enthusiasm, together with an infinite capacity for taking pains. He was never good at giving up an interest before he had completed whatever relevant task he had set himself in it.

He was remarkably well read, entirely honest, totally dependable, and never overawed. The possession of complete rectitude may perhaps appear rather dull in these unregenerate days, but John Philipson was never dull. The twinkle in his eye was never far away, and if on occasion his humour had its pawky side it was always both genuine and entertaining. This was well exemplified in some of his own historical researches. Such topics as the forging by the younger Pitt's government of French *assignats* during the French Revolutionary War, or the practices of whisky smuggling and illicit distilling, are matters of genuine scholarly

interest in their own right, but here their earnest researcher was always perfectly well aware that they had a funny side too. He could appreciate, and also be entertained by, the hostile reaction of Thomas Bewick and Sir John Swinburne to the British attempts to debauch the currency of revolutionary France. Perhaps this instance may be connected with his repeated claim that in politics he was always a Whig!

In this Society we are going to miss John Philipson very much. This short memoir may be fittingly ended by quoting from a speech he made after Mary and he had just returned from a sojourn in an attractive part of France. They drove out of Newcastle into the Coquet valley, and he later told how

My wife and I agreed that nowhere was there a fairer landscape than this, with sunshine and

shadow on the green hills, the varied hues of woodland hedge and meadow and the innumerable birds not yet silenced by the advance of summer.

To me this countryside is not something divorced from mankind. I like to know that in 1604 three families made a living on this bare hillside, with so many acres of oats, some inbye meadow, and cattle grazing on the hill; that here Lancelot Potts cut millstones; that on a greasy path two miles from where I now sleep quiet o' nights two men kept nightly watch for raiding Scots. I like to sit in a farm kitchen and hear talk of Kelso ram sales, the state of the weather, who is being married to whom, and the prospects of building a new manse.

He was a great Northumbrian.

Norman McCord