

## A MEMORIAL OF ALEXANDER ORMISTON CURLE.

Alexander Curle was born in June 1866, the third son of Alexander Curle, W.S., of Priorwood, Melrose. He was educated at Fettes College and at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, and was admitted a Writer to the Signet in 1892. In 1908, on the creation of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, he was appointed its Secretary, and held this position until 1913 when he succeeded Dr Joseph Anderson as Director of the National Museum of Antiquities. In this same year, after ceasing to be the Commission's Secretary, he was appointed as one of its members. At the National Museum he could accomplish comparatively little, as on the outbreak of the First World War the collections were packed up and stored, and the building was taken over for use as Government offices; but in 1916 he was given charge of the Royal Scottish Museum as well, and he managed both institutions until 1919 when he was relieved at the National Museum by Dr J. Graham Callander. The Royal Scottish Museum he directed until he reached the age of retirement in 1931, and he is remembered there for two principal achievements—the raising, to a very marked degree, of the general standard of the collections in the *Department of Art*, and the introduction of much more attractive methods of display. Membership of the Ancient Monuments Commission he retained until 1951, resigning in that year for reasons of health. He was active in public work outside his official appointments, serving at various times on the Council of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, the Advisory Board for Scotland under the Ancient Monuments Acts, the National Trust for Scotland, the Holyrood Trust, the Dalrymple Trust, etc. He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1893 and of the Society of Antiquaries of London in 1911; he was appointed a Commander of the Royal Victorian Order in 1930, and was awarded the degree of LL.D. by Glasgow University in 1935. He was twice married, in 1898 to Katharine Wray, daughter of Captain George Tancred of Weens, and in 1909 to Jocelyn Winifred, daughter of Henry Butler. He died in January 1955 in his eighty-ninth year, survived by a son and a daughter of his first marriage.

A memorial presented to this Society should naturally be concerned, in the main, with Curle's career as an antiquary, and in this his work for the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments deserved to be considered first. The list of his published papers shows that, before 1908, he was already actively interested both in field archæology and in records; and he was also, at this time, associated with Dr Joseph Anderson, at the National Museum of Antiquities, through being one of the Society's Secretaries. It was consequently a logical move on the part of the Ancient Monuments Commissioners, whose policy it was to build up their Inventories on a basis of fresh research, to secure him as their own Secretary; and indeed one may be confident that it was he himself who influenced the Commissioners in the decision, recorded in their first Report, that their Secretary should "visit each county in turn, with the object of personally inspecting each monument so as to satisfy [them] . . . as to its true character and condition." As a result, Curle was able to embark on a field-work programme the conception and scale of which far outran anything previously attempted; and an earnest of the use that he made of this unique opportunity is to be seen in the Commission's earlier Inventory volumes. Berwickshire, Sutherland and Caithness he surveyed

single-handed between 1908 and 1911, and he brought out the Berwickshire volume in 1909 and the two others in 1911 with no more than clerical assistance. In 1911 his staff was strengthened by an architect and an architectural draughtsman, with whose help he was able to survey three further counties (Wigtownshire, the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright, and Dumfriesshire) in that and the following year. He produced the Wigtownshire Inventory in 1912, though the other two volumes remained to be brought out later by his successor. The physical achievement represented by these early surveys is little short of prodigious, as Curle was not only forced to use a bicycle as his ordinary means of transport, where we have cars and even cross-country vehicles, but he also made a practice of writing up notes in the evening, after a strenuous day's work in the open, and was able, moreover, to draft them in a finished form ready for typist and printer. The fact that these pioneer efforts do not reach the standards expected in field-work to-day, after half a century of development in archaeological technique, must not make us forget how great an advance they marked on most of the work done in the 19th century. As a Commissioner, in later years, Curle constantly supported progressive ideas of all sorts, and was always delighted to assist in the work himself in a practical way. It was wholly typical of his continuing keenness and vigour that he walked to the top of Rubers Law at the age of seventy-nine to show the present writer the position of the Roman building-stones, of which he alone had knowledge.

A record of much of the rest of his archaeological work can be found in the Society's *Proceedings*. In the course of the sixty-two years during which he was a Fellow, he contributed or was joint author in no less than forty-eight papers. Many of these, describing major excavations, possess a permanent importance—for example, those on Traprain Law (joint authorship, 1914–21), Mumrills fort (joint authorship with Sir George Macdonald, 1925–9), Jarlshof (1931–5) and Freswick (1939). Of the hoard of Roman silver, unearthed during the Traprain excavations, he made a separate record in his great book *The Treasure of Traprain*. Other papers, less important but recording fresh facts of great interest, are those on Rubers Law (1905), Bonchester Hill, and hut-circles in the Strath of Kildonan (1910), Langwell (1911), Teroy (1912), Hawick Mote (1913), Dun Troddan (1921), Wiltrow (1936) and Forse (1941 and 1948). His discussion of domestic candlesticks (1926) also deserves mention here. As the Society's Rhind Lecturer (1918) he discussed the Prehistoric Monuments of Scotland; these lectures have never been published, but the typescript is deposited in the Library of the National Museum. His Scandinavian colleagues held him in high esteem for his pioneer work on Norse houses in Shetland and Caithness, and it was fitting that the last paper of his life should have been presented to the Viking Congress, held at Lerwick in 1950.

But Curle's contribution to the Society's activities was by no means confined to reports on his own discoveries. He was constant in attendance at meetings, and the discussions that followed the papers owed much to his wide knowledge of the Scottish monuments and to his familiarity with endless relics in British and foreign museums. His own style of lecturing was most happy, and delighted his hearers; in later years, at any rate, he eschewed the reading of formal papers altogether, presenting his material from notes and slides in an easy conversational style. He was generous with information to colleagues and advice to the inexperienced, and was always strong in condemnation of an insular approach to archaeological questions. In this last respect he set an example by repeatedly touring the European museums, and by the connections that he fostered with Scandinavian savants. Both by his own efforts and through his association with

his brother, James Curle, and Sir George Macdonald, he was able to exert a weighty formative influence on the Scottish archæology of his time.

To return to his connection with the Society; a note is required of his service in its various offices. Thus he was a Secretary, junior or senior, from 1905 to 1913, Assistant Secretary from 1913 to 1919, Curator of the Museum from 1919 to 1925, Librarian from 1925 to 1938, Vice-President from 1938 to 1942 and again from 1946 to 1948, and a Councillor in 1904, from 1942 to 1944, and in 1945 and 1946. In 1951 the Fellows presented him with an address "as an expression of their personal regard, as a token of their gratitude for the work done by him in the various offices he has held since his first election to the Council in 1904, and as a memorial of his great contribution to Scottish antiquarian research; a partial proof of which is to be seen in the subjoined list of the papers communicated by him to the Society between 1895 and 1948." A list of his papers followed.

The foregoing account, being concerned with Curle the antiquary, gives a rather distorted picture of Curle the man. It remains, therefore, to add that he was by no means limited to archæological pursuits, but delighted in a wide variety of artistic and other interests. He possessed a connoisseur's taste, and was himself an expert in glass, of which he formed a fine collection. His candlesticks have already been mentioned. When abroad he occupied himself with pictures and mediæval buildings as much as with the museums that formed the main object of his travels. In literature his love was for poetry, particularly for Border ballads and the older Scottish verse; he continued to learn poetry by heart almost until the end of his life. The chief outdoor recreation of his younger days was walking, and in making his Inventory surveys in wild moorland regions he would cover great distances on foot. In his later life the cultivation of rare plants, and particularly of rare Alpine plants, became an absorbing interest; he was a regular exhibitor at the shows of the Scottish Rock Garden Club, and won a large number of prizes. Final memories are of the charm of his manner, of his enthusiasm for every project, and of his humour, hospitality and kindness.

ANGUS GRAHAM.