

## Obituaries

### Robert Barron Kerr Stevenson

Robert Stevenson was born in Glasgow in 1913, the only child of W B Stevenson, Professor of Hebrew and Semitic Languages at the University there, and Madge Kerr, a Scot but born near Dublin.

After Glasgow Academy and Fettes College, he went on to Edinburgh University, where he graduated MA with honours in Classics, and to the University of Bonn where he studied archaeology as well as learning the language. At Edinburgh he had been a student of Gordon Childe's and he continued his studies at the Institute of Archaeology in London. It should be noted that his father's interest in sundials and merchants' marks had introduced him to the study of artefacts. Robert Stevenson learned his trade not only with Childe, but also with Sir Mortimer Wheeler at Maiden Castle, and with Dr Kathleen Kenyon at Wroxeter. In addition he had two seasons at the Great Palace of the Byzantine Emperors at Istanbul which gave him a life-long interest in pottery glazes. At home he surveyed and excavated Iron Age and later settlement sites in the Manor valley before war came, and he would probably have continued in the field had it not conflicted with what was to be his life work in the National Museum.

He became the Assistant Keeper of the National Museum of Antiquities in 1938, under A J H Edwards, but the outbreak of war a year later saw the collections put in store and his transfer to the Department of Health, an experience which, he said afterwards, was of some assistance in his many jousts with the Civil Service mentality. Called up in 1942, he took part in the Sicily landings and served in Italy, ending his Army career as a Major in the Intelligence Corps because of his knowledge of Italian. Edwards died during the war, cutting short what might have been a valuable partnership between a scientist and a classicist who always wanted to be a scientist. It meant, however, that the Keepership of the Museum was vacant. Stevenson was appointed to the post in 1946. To help him he had two technicians and a typist. The names of Willie Darroch, John Brown and Miss Webster must be recorded here for no Keeper ever had better assistants.

The situation in the National Museum in 1946 has been ably described and evaluated by Stuart Piggott in the Festschrift presented to Stevenson after his retiral in 1978 (*From the Stone Age to the 'Forty-five*); and Stevenson's own account in his second chapter relating the Museum's history in *The Scottish Antiquarian Tradition* (1981) fills in the details. In short, the Council of the Society of Antiquaries no longer had the influence it once had, and the Board of Trustees of the National Galleries, which stood between the Keeper and his Civil Service masters, was, naturally enough, not prepared to fight the battles of a small, grossly underfunded museum. This was the position when I joined the Museum as Assistant Keeper in 1947; looking back I can only marvel at the confidence with which Robert Stevenson faced the battles ahead. He never wavered from his belief that we were in charge of a magnificent collection which we would improve and extend in accordance with the finest contemporary museums, and he certainly made me believe this would happen. Read again the account Stevenson gave of the Museum's progress from 1946 to the appointment of the Philip Committee in 1951 and its outcome: the appointment of our own Board of Trustees in 1954. Many people had a hand in that achievement but without Robert Stevenson's patient persistence and steadfast vision it would not have come to pass. The near achievement of a

new building in 1974 and all the other improvements in staffing, display, conservation and research seem to me, in retrospect, lesser victories than that of 1954.

Museum politics, however, did not fill all his days. Throughout his museum life, and afterwards, he worked on an astonishing variety of aspects of material culture, and he published practically all his researches. The lengthy bibliography (to 1976) included in his Festschrift gives details, and the title of that book *From the Stone Age to the 'Forty-five* almost describes the chronological range of his interests, 'almost' since these extended well after 1745, with perhaps his enthusiasm for the furniture of Charles Rennie Mackintosh (of which he obtained several examples for the Museum) marking the end of the line.

His early excavations, Manor valley and Braidwood, and later fieldwork were published in the Society's *Proceedings*. It was typical that he studied the early evidences of agriculture on Arthur's Seat, at his back door; Dalmahoy, and its 'nuclear fort' (a name invented by him) a little further afield, was weekend work, also published. He did not omit to publish two papers on his Italian Neolithic studies.



Objects in the Museum collection were examined and published, ranging from Neolithic pottery at one extreme to Charles I's coronation ampulla at the other. Often these were brief notes on objects whose significance he alone perceived; sometimes, as with a series of papers on Iron Age artefacts and sites, they led to a major essay on Iron Age metalwork. A subject was never finished for him, as witnessed by his lifelong interest in Early Christian art in Scotland and Ireland – the stone crosses, Pictish art and the metalwork in which the Museum collections are so rich.

The discovery of a hoard of Anglo-Saxon coins on Iona in 1950 made Stevenson a numismatist; he was never one to do things by halves and it was not until 1966 that his researches culminated in his splendid contribution to the 'Sylloge of Coins of the British Isles' on the Anglo-Saxon and associated coins in the Museum. His devotion to Celtic and Pictish studies might give the impression that it was the beauty of the Anglo-Saxon coins which attracted him, but aesthetics had no part in his authoritative studies of the Stirling turners of Charles I (surely the unloveliest of coins) and his subsequent dogged pursuit of the groats of James V (forthcoming in the *British Numismatic Journal*) and the placks of James IV, James V and Mary Queen of Scots. His honorary fellowship of the Royal Numismatic Society, conferred in 1979, was fitting reward for his work on Scottish coins, which I am convinced began because there was a job to be done and no one else to do it.

Within the narrower world of the National Museum itself, Stevenson's contribution was obvious for all to see: from the series of special exhibitions, some in collaboration with the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, to the achievement of a design department; from his fostering of the Museum's conservation section to the addition of the research laboratory; from his early efforts to nurture a Scottish folk museum to the opening of the Agricultural Museum at Ingliston, in all of these and many more he was the creator or the inspirer or both. I can write from personal knowledge of how he pressed me to produce a costume collection and to bring our small silver collection up to national collection standards; here again the collecting of silver spoons was recognized as just as important for our knowledge of the subject as the acquisition of the Cadboll Cup and the Galloway Mazer. If a collection in the Museum was good, he strove to make it better; if it did not exist, he began it. The work of the photographic section was very dear to his heart. For him the library was as important as any other department; his facility with languages and wide reading greatly expanded its scope. I have not tried to mention every aspect which merits inclusion.

Robert Stevenson never liked formal meetings and committees and was at odds with the way such things multiplied. For him it was always the personal approach and no member of staff with a problem was refused an interview. Often you had to be persistent, however, and wait until the head bowed over the desk was eventually raised. He had a similar approach to the public using the Museum. He had to be very busy before an enquiring visitor was turned away. He was never one to issue directions to his staff, but the message that the enquiring non-specialist visitor deserved our attention as much as the expert got through to them; our collections were there to be used by all honest seekers after knowledge.

He served on the Museums Association Council for a term and ensured that the Museum was represented at conferences, but the affairs of the Scottish Federation were much nearer his heart. He constantly preached in the early days that the presence of museum professionals in the local museums (many of which were adjuncts of public libraries) was the way forward for Scotland and that the National Museum's resources were always at their disposal. The 1951 exhibition in Glasgow, 'Scotland's Ancient Treasures', in which most of our finest and most valuable objects were shown, was indeed a landmark; no other national director would have contemplated such a thing at that time. Another example of his attitude to our local museums was the long struggle he

undertook to alter the 'Treasure Trove' legislation; he did not think it fair that the National Museum should be the inevitable home for *bona vacantia*; and it ought to be remembered that he led the fight to create the present legislation. To achieve this he had to make himself as expert as the lawyers in a difficult subject, and he had to rouse the Federation to the importance of the issue.

Robert Stevenson had a deep affection for the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. He served on its Council for a longer period than anyone else in recent times, often at odds with his fellow councillors, always on the side of making the Society more open and more in tune with modern needs. Society lecture days were special for the Museum; we always displayed in the library a case of recent acquisitions or objects relevant to the lecture. And no one had a better record of attendance, whatever the subject. He was very proud to be the Society's President from 1975 to 1978.

He was made a CBE in 1976; the following year he was appointed a Fellow of University College, London, and his alma mater gave him a D Litt in 1981. He was also a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London and of the Museums Association.

Never a political nationalist he was yet very conscious of the Scottish nation he strove to serve; he loved to travel in Europe, but he was equally happy to visit sites and encourage field workers in every corner of Scotland. Straddling as he did the Edinburgh–Glasgow divide, to dash at the last minute to catch the Glasgow train for a meeting or lecture there came naturally to him – and no one had the art of catching trains at the last minute better than he.

Robert Stevenson married Elizabeth Begg in 1951 and they had twin sons. He was fortunate in his marriage to one who shared and complemented his varied interests. His busy life left little time for recreations; he was always a genial host and during his long membership of the Antiquaries Dining Club (which made him an honorary member) it was evident that he was essentially a convivial man.

It must be recorded that the amalgamation of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, the Society's museum, with the Royal Scottish Museum saddened him greatly. It is perhaps the supreme tribute to Robert Stevenson to record that despite that conclusion to all he had striven for he was in the Museum working on the coin collection only a few days before his death.

*Stuart Maxwell*