II.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE VALUE OF RUBBINGS IN THE PREPARATION OF MONUMENTAL DRAWINGS (ILLUSTRATED BY DRAWINGS, RUBBINGS OF SLABS, ROCK-SCULPTURE, ETC.) By Captain T. P. WHITE, R.E.

The question I propose to discuss in this paper, is the value of really good rubbings in preparing monumental drawings of flat slabs, such as those most frequently found throughout Scotland, this issue having been distinctly raised on the occasion of our last meeting, in a paper by one of the members.

Before doing so, however, I must ask your indulgence on a somewhat more personal matter. Those who were present at that meeting are aware

that certain criticisms were passed upon a set of drawings illustrative of Saddell Abbey, contained in the last volume of our printed Proceedings. With one or two exceptions, these drawings, as was distinctly stated, were produced from rubbings, that is to say, they were the best interpretations that I was able to make of those rubbings, without a second visit to the spot. My object is to have the most perfect drawing that can be obtained, and, so far as the criticisms were correct, I have to record my obligations to the gentleman who made them. It need hardly be said that any one whose first object is not *truth*, should have no title to call himself a working member of a scientific body. But there are various degrees of truth, short of absolute perfection, with which we have to put up, through want of time, means, and opportunity; and work may be very good work, without being what it very rarely is, altogether unassailable. That is my general reply to the charges of inaccuracy.

Having had an opportunity since last meeting of revisiting Saddell, and making all necessary corrections in the drawings, the members of the Society will at a glance recognise the trifling extent of the alterations, by comparing the corrected drawings with the prints from the originals. (The corrected drawings were exhibited).[1]

I may add respecting Saddell, that, after the publication of the first drawings, I became aware of a certain unsatisfactoriness in them, due to over-sharpness of the outlines, which failed to render the softening effects of age and weather. These defects I have endeavoured to rectify in subsequent drawings, as will be seen from specimens now exhibited. Having to revisit Saddell, I had long contemplated taking that opportunity of testing my first efforts, and at the same time completing our collection of mediæval monuments there. Both these objects have now been carried out, and drawings of the whole of the monuments, numbering eleven, have been obtained.

[1] I need not go through the details *seriatim* as it was necessary to do at the meeting. The principal points under criticism were the blending of a hand and trefoil on a shield in one of the rubbings, causing them to look like an animal's stump—the crossing of the legs in a Christ's figure from a similar slight misreading, and in an effigy much foreshortened, which I sketched, the omission of a spear from its being merely indicated by an incisure, and not relieved like the rest of the figure. There were a few other small items objected to, mere matters of individual interpretation, in respect of which I am unable to agree with the objector.

I pass now to the consideration of the more general issue, namely, the value of rubbings in the preparation of monumental drawings; and let me at once say that, in my opinion, one of the briefest and best observations I could make to you on the subject would be,—look round this room at these specimens of rubbed tracings from different parts of Scotland (upwards of fifty of which were exhibited) and settle the question for yourselves. Are not these tracings pictures in themselves, and must not drawings rigidly copied from them, just as they stand, retain, to a large extent, their verisimilitude and pictorial character?[1] It is this value, strengthened by an after touching of the drawing on the spot, which I wish to compare with the value of unassisted free-hand sketching. Let it first be clearly understood to what class of objects I refer in instituting this comparison. Any flat surface of a hard material, stone for example, with incised spaces carved on it, will give a paper impression by means of rubbing with grass, kail, or other vegetable matter, better, I think, than with heel-ball, or black composition. But it is essential that the carved work should be upon a flat ground, with simple hollows cut into it. There must be no attempt to represent rounded forms by convexities or concavities. Everything pictorial must be restricted to outlines, depending for their ornamental effect upon harmonious grouping, assisted by vertical relief, so as to form one flush surface. Now these are precisely the conditions which obtain on flat tombstones, bare sculptured rocks, &c., but especially in the mediæval slabs of this class, and in monumental brasses. Mr Pugin, a very high authority on such matters, particularly calls attention to the peculiar characteristics of Gothic panel-work, eulogising the chasteness of this class of ornamentation in contrast with the debased style of florid roundness which was prevalent elsewhere. As an example of what I mean, look at the chalices on the drawings now shown. A real goblet seen sideways is of course round; yet on the stone it is represented by a flat surface, not a hemisphere—a profile outline, in fact, projected into a horizontal plane. An exception to this is met with in the effigies brought up into higher relief, and for that reason I do not consider such monuments fit subjects

[1] The same may be said of a photograph, supposing photography were applied at once to the rubbing. But then, we should still have only a negative representation entailing additional expense in its production.

for rubbing. They fall properly within the domain of hand-sketching. Again, observe in all the slabs with ornamental foliage how every leaf is essentially a flat surface, with no other ornament but incised outlines. Knot-work, figures of animals, figures of men, sword handles, galleys, and so on, all are expressed by the chisel cutting perpendicularly down into the surface of the stone, and leaving a sharp edge. The only roundness, then, we need look for in these stones is in the edges of the incisures, which, after a lapse of time, will naturally get worn down, more or less according to the exposure. Another exception to this rule, is in the beadings and, to some extent, in the larger figures of ecclesiastics cut in low relief. Sometimes, as was the case with a superb ornamental slab at Killean, which my assistant, I believe, was the first to discover, and trace for me,—a stone is hidden away from exposure to weather and ill-usage; and thus the lines come out as fresh and sharp almost as if cut yesterday. The wonderful symmetry of the thread-like incisures, the faultlessness of every spiral sweep, speak for themselves in the rubbing. Conceive an artist refusing a perfect reduction from this slab to shade in, and setting to work instead to draw it free-hand in expectation of arriving at the same accuracy! Let him try to copy with scientific exactitude such a slab as the tombstone of the four Priors at Iona, or the wonderful rock-sculpture exhibited in the next room. Or, again, such labyrinthine carvings as we find depicted upon some of the eastern pillar-stones given in the Spalding Club's magnificent work!

I think, then, it must be clear, that the usual type of western ornamental slab is peculiarly adapted for copying by the rubbing process. I say nothing here about paper or plaster casts, which, of course, while having certain advantages over rubbings, require, I imagine, more time and trouble in their preparation.

The next question is this: Given a really good rubbing, carefully taken, what is likely to be its maximum faultiness, and from what causes? My answer is, that a good rubbing will be an almost perfect reprint of the stone, not merely giving all the outlines of the figuring in exact drawing, but reproducing every chip and crack in the upper surface of that figuring. It will be, in fact, like a life-size photograph, only often supplying much more than a photograph could do. Every little turn and twist, every minute deviation from uniformity in the pattern, every break in the

edges, comes out clear and life-like; but always, of course, like the photographic negative, light in the hollows or shadowed portions, and dark on the upper surfaces. On the other hand, the worn roundness of edges, and any weather marks within the hollows, will escape the rubbing. But there is another property of the rubbing upon which I wish to lay particular stress, in contrast with what free-hand drawing can attain to. This is, that in much obliterated slabs the rubbing will search out and record far *more* than the eye can possibly see on the slab *in situ*, at any stage of the sunlight, producing, so to speak, a resuscitation of what once was visible, but is so no longer. The reason of this doubtless is, that it may be often simply impossible to clear off a recumbent slab every lichen-stain, discoloration, or particle of dirt; and thus, when the edges of the design have sustained extreme attrition, the shadows which originally marked out the pattern become blurred or blotted out, and fail to convey to the eye the real spirit and meaning of the original sculpture. It was thus that the Saddell drawings showed more freshness of detail than is apparent on the ground. Often have I been struck with this peculiarity, this revivifying power in the rubbing. A notable instance is the ancient cross at Sanda Island. It will be seen what the rubbing shows which has been reproduced in my drawing. I stayed two or three hours in the afternoon on the island, and saw the stone most of the time. Yet not the faintest indication of the various interlaced patterns—not even the divisions into panelling, except to a very slight extent, could be detected by the eye. This example particularly impresed me, as I had in my hand the pencilled reduction, and was quite taken aback to find no sign of the ornamentation visible beyond the holes of the cross-head. I have also here another fragment on which one can make out a pattern of linked circles and beautiful underlying plaitwork, that must have been very elaborate. Now the surface of this stone is so unmarked to the eye, that after minutely examining it, and finding only a tiny hole here and there, I was obliged to rub it before I could decide if it was mediæval or not. Could there be a more striking proof of the power of the rubbing? Or, again, look at this elegant slab at Saddell; one of those I formerly described as having on it a single sword, with the surrounding tracery nearly defaced. The rubbing tells a different story, for it shows us, with a sufficient clearness, the whole intention, character, and detail of

the carving, almost as if we had seen it when freshly cut. Viewing the stone you can just make out the sword, all else being "a mass of indistinctness." Yet how the cross and pedestal have come out underneath the sword, and what sharp, graceful lines the foliage assumes on the rubbing! In the drawing, it is clear I must represent more than I *saw* on the stone, or else I shall be untrue to the life and spirit which, though hidden to the eye, still animate the sculpture.

Rapidity of execution is another great point in favour of rubbing. Those three specimens I took myself in half an hour. How long would an artist be in doing justice to free-hand drawings of them? Of course my particular duties, which take me constantly through the localities where the rubbings were made, give great facilities for revisiting the ground, and touching in the reduced copies. So far I have endeavoured to show that, intrinsically, the rubbing must possess, in some respects, superior qualities of accuracy, and in many cases be a fuller record of the sculpture than the best unaided drawing can be. The next question is, how to utilise the rubbing for purposes of general illustration.

If I have established the high value of a good rubbing in itself, or of a photograph taken from it,—that which shall substitute for the negative representation a positive one with light and shade, in their proper relative places, must surely be an advance upon either. So that, if a draftsman sits down with a reduced pencilled copy of one of these rubbings, and simply effects the substitution I speak of, he must come a step nearer the end aimed at, namely, a perfect representation. Indeed, where the details of the rubbing are all obviously complete and intelligible, if he stopped there, and never revisited the ground at all, there would still undeniably be a drawing of a very high value to the historian, the archæologist, and the artist.

But I admit at once the desirability of touching up and perfecting the reduction on the spot. And when this is done, what unprejudiced person can doubt that the result must be a nearer approximation to the truth than the free-hand work of the same draftsman? Put into the hands of an artist the skeleton imprint or fac-simile of that stone's sculptured surface for him to work upon, and you give him half the battle at once, and much more than half. Free-hand drawing has its proper sphere, without undertaking too much. Glance at some of the more elaborate specimens

of slab carving, and imagine what it would be to draw in by hand the multiplicity and extreme intricacy of detail here pictured! What would be the chances of getting into accurate position every touch and curve of a leaf or twist of a stem, or the endless ramifications of that running knot, or of that other interlaced wheel? Might not a crack be left out here, a chip there, and so on? Could every part of the carving be expected to appear in the unerringly true proportion given by the rubbing? Impossible, I say. You might set fifty draftsmen opposite that rock-sculpture to sketch it free-hand, and not one of them would turn out the same drawing as any other.

This, then, is the position I hope I have succeeded in establishing.—(1.) That the monumental sculptured slab of the class generally found in the West Highlands is peculiarly suited for copying by the rubbing process. (2.) That in point of outline accuracy such copies, and the drawings resulting therefrom, must more or less, according to the intricacy of the sculpture, surpass anything the free-hand sketcher can attain to. (3.) That in slabs much worn down, more detail oftentimes is caught and printed off in this way than is visible to the naked eye; and (4.) and lastly, That a mechanically reduced pencil copy of such a rubbing, placed in the hands of a draftsman to touch in afterwards on the ground, should, without sacrificing pictorial effect, be a more scientifically valuable illustration of the slab than a mere free-hand sketch by the same draftsman could be. But let me not be misunderstood. By "scientifically valuable," I mean valuable for the purposes of the historian and archæologist, that being undoubtedly the primary requirement. The artistic excellence of the drawings is for such purposes another but clearly a secondary matter. Were the point of issue one of pure art, the mechanism must at once be thrown aside. If we wanted simply a charmingly executed picture and nothing else, then, of course, considerations of what constitute artistic merit proper would come uppermost, which would alter the case entirely. Personal skill, the individual mind of the artist, and such like qualities, would immediately affect the question. But it is just these personalities or idiosyncrasies that we are not to recognise here; that, indeed, it is desirable to eliminate, except so far as they may serve in the capacity of handmaids to the strict object in view,—that object being, I take it, to bring the nearest thing to the slab itself, with its collection of facts before

us, on the paper. Yet by all means having secured this first desideratum, superadd all the personal artistic embellishments in your power. And I see no reason why, when viewed simply as pictorial results, without reference to the means employed in their production, drawings fortified by rubbings should not reach the highest degree of excellence.[1]

I had hoped to say something more than time permits me to do upon the subjects delineated on these slab-rubbings, some of which are very peculiar and interesting. These are only a few selected from our collection; and want of space unfortunately has prevented my exhibiting more than one of the fourteen groups of archaic rock sculptures which we have obtained from the neighbourhood of Lochgilphead. This, however, is the largest (though some of the others are not much smaller), and I have nearly finished a drawing on a large scale from it, produced by the same system as the slab illustrations. Others are in hand, so that I hope shortly to have the whole series completed. The camera could, I think, be brought to bear on these rock-rubbings with great effect, but with this drawback, that the natural cracks and strata marks of the rock are not very readily distinguishable from the artificial carvings till you go to the ground. Among the slabs will be observed two rare specimens, one with the figure of a mythic-looking animal, something like a camel, having a horn protruding from its back, the other showing side by side with a knight a figure in what resembles a page's costume of the fifteenth century. There are also some uncommon types of circular ornamentation; two or three

[1] Since reading the paper before the Society, I have slightly altered this sentence, that my meaning may be clearer, which is to distinguish between *subjective* and *objective* value respectively in a picture, a point Mr Ruskin has argued in all its bearings. For instance, a photozincograph or other good print from a beautiful hand-etching might be such a fac-simile of the original as to reproduce all its artistic freedom and beauty, yet as a work of art be inadmissible. Why inadmissible? Simply because the subjective quality is wanting in the print, though its objective value as a result is quite equal to that of the original. In fact, the actual amount of difficulty experienced in producing a drawing is an element of art-value, since it implies more or less skill and power for its subjugation. But still, from what has been said, it will be seen that, even to take the artist on his own ground, drawings on my plan may possess every subjective art-requirement save in one respect only, the outlining; while the attempt to satisfy this requirement by free-hand would only involve the sacrifice of other and yet more essential art-qualities, such as accuracy and correct proportion. Thus, from the most rigidly artistic platform my *modus operandi* is about quits with hand-sketching.

antique styles of cross; a great variety of sword patterns; and in this fragment from the north-west, an archer drawing his bow, who is attired in what, most of anything I have yet seen upon these monuments, resembles the genuine kilt. Another is a specimen from Lochgoilhead, unique in my experience, as illustrating the transition from the beautifully ornate style of early monumental art to the pretentious ugliness of the later Post-Reformation tombstone. With the ancient type of knot-work, you will see associated such emblems of handicraft as the pick, woodman's axe, &c.; also a human arm with open hand, an animal, an inscription bearing the name "M'Ivar," and the tell-tale date 1591, all cut in bold and uniform relief; while scribbled over the axe are the traces of a later appropriation of the stone, in the name "Robart M'Farlin" and date 1697.

Of the slab-rubbings in the room (I think there are some fifty), a good many have been already drawn, and the results I hope shortly to have an opportunity of bringing before you; and I am in hopes the work will proceed as time permits towards some sort of comprehensive illustration of Western Scottish monumental art.

Mr James Drummond, R.S.A., before reading the annexed remarks on the same subject,—the value of Rubbings as compared with Drawings, observed that the remarks in Captain White's communications principally resulted from some strictures made by him at last meeting of the Society, upon the incorrectness of representation in the illustrations to a "Notice of Saddell Abbey, Kintyre," printed in the Transactions, and Captain White having this evening shown his original drawings for that paper, since then corrected by comparison with the antiquities themselves, and altered in almost every particular to which objection had been taken, thus showing that the criticisms were just and called for. He expressed surprise that his remarks the other evening should have been construed into anything of a personal nature. There was no such intention on his part, seeing that he put the blame of inaccuracy on the fact that the drawings had been done from rubbings, which was the argument used for their accuracy. On that occasion he had stated that it seemed to him impossible to make correct drawings from rubbings of anything having an irregularly raised surface, and that the drawings under consideration were an illustration of this:—

On the Value of Rubbings as compared with Drawings.—There are two classes of Rubbings,—one from an object having a slightly raised surface, such as the crosses and memorial slabs in the West Highlands; the other from a smooth surface, having a design of some sort incised or engraved upon it, as seen on the monumental brasses so common in England, and of which only a very few remain in Scotland. Rubbings from these latter may be done on a light paper, with a black substance, in which case the engraved lines of the original come out of the colour of the paper; or on a dark paper, with a light material, when the result will nearly be a fac-simile of the original. These may be used to make drawings from at any time, with perfect safety. Rubbings of the former kind, from an uneven surface, are of an entirely different character, suggestive and useful, giving an admirable idea of the general style of design and ornamentation, of length, breadth, and all that sort of thing; but there it ends, for unfortunately everything on the surface comes up in a rubbing, with an unnatural distinctness, while all the delicate gradation of the sculpturing, the depth of the carving, or the nature of it, are entirely awanting, and then the more weather-worn the original, the worse the rubbing; valuable they are as reference, dangerous as illustrations. To make correct drawings from such it is quite impossible, the only safety being in a careful comparison with and correction from the original, and even then it must occasionally be bewildering, from what was told us the other evening as a recommendation, that objects sometimes came out in the rubbing the meaning or form of which could not be deciphered with the naked eye. This seems to me one of the greatest dangers of the system, for we all know how easily the most acute may be deceived by such markings, which in the majority of cases must be caused, in most stones, by weathering, or perhaps by having been, at some time or other, injudiciously scraped or tampered with in attempting to make out some delicately sculptured ornamentation; and it is curious, but true, that shadows of this sort will gradually, in one's mind, assume a sort of shape, and once there, nothing can efface the impression, and so they are drawn. To correct such drawings from the originals in a proper spirit, I should suppose would require a good deal of manipulative skill, and a knowledge of drawing sufficient to make the copy entirely from the originals themselves; and I can assure any one who has the power to do this, and yet submits

to the uninteresting mechanical labour of such a process, that he is depriving himself of one of the greatest pleasures in hunting up these interesting relics of what we almost feel to be a forgotten art, a sort of indescribable sensation, as if the design were growing under your hand, the very difficulty of making out often giving an increased zest to the pleasure of the pursuit. In addition to all, there must be a great saving of time in doing them from the stones themselves; of course, if time was no object, it would be the last of my thoughts to find fault with any one having recourse to mechanical means if he preferred it.

It has often occurred to myself, and no doubt to others, that approximate date might be got at, from the nature and form of the symbols sculptured upon these monuments, locality certainly. Galleys, for instance, are a good illustration, some having the sails and rigging arranged after a particular fashion, others having an animal of some sort at the prow, occasionally at both stern and prow; then we have a pennon or a shield of arms, each variety more common to some localities than others.

The sword also varies according to the locality. At Kilmichael-Glassary they differ from what we find at Kilmartin, and at Strachur they are different from the specimens at Knapdale. At Iona alone have you much variety both in these and the build of the galleys. In some districts you have deer-stalking hinted at by finding deer pursued by hounds; again is represented a dog after a hare, pointing to coursing; the otter and salmon, indicating salmon fishing and otter hunting. Only one object the same everywhere, the womanly symbol, the shears. In a paper which I read to this Society two years ago, I drew special attention to a marked peculiarity in the effigies of the Highland chiefs—viz., that in the very great majority of cases they were armed with a spear in addition to the sword, in those represented as standing in a niche or riding on horseback almost invariably so. This is quite peculiar to the West Highlands. The form of the dress or armour is also puzzling, so unlike what we find in other countries, the surcoat of cloth or leather seemingly quilted in long regular folds, while it is held close to the arms by what seems to be two iron or steel bands, one above, the other below the elbow; the mode of belting on the sword is also singular. All these should be noted down with great exactness, if such are to be of any historical value.

That, however, which I have always thought would help us to date more

certainly than anything sculptured upon these West Highland monuments, is the figure of Christ upon the cross. At first nothing seems to have been attempted beyond the head, and perhaps the shoulders of the Saviour, being thus represented on the shaft of a cross still remaining at the ancient burying ground of Kilavon, Loch Fyne. In the earliest examples of those having the full figure, there were four nails, one for each hand and one for each foot, the feet being separate, and the figure fully draped. The next stage seems to have been a diminution of the drapery, the feet still separate; then came the feet nailed together, and in the latest examples, the drapery was reduced to little more than a slight covering for the loins. I mention these particulars for the consideration of all interested in such matters, to show the necessity of accurate observation and representation, —if by drawings, it signifies not how roughly or rudely, only let them be correct as to fact; a few lines will sometimes convey a peculiarity as clearly as the most elaborate study.