

II.

ON THE POSITION OF LOCAL MUSEUMS IN REGARD TO ARCHÆOLOGICAL OBJECTS. BY GEORGE HUNTER THOMS, ADVOCATE, SHERIFF OF ORKNEY AND CAITHNESS, F.S.A. SCOT.

While in the billet my subject is announced as being "On the Position of Local Museums in regard to Archæological Objects," it might have been also connected with a search for the Old Lectern of St. Giles.

This leads me in the first instance to explain how I come to obtrude myself at this time on the Society. I have, as is pretty generally known, taken an interest in the restoration of our oldest historic building in Edinburgh, namely, St. Giles' Cathedral Church. Accordingly, I was one day in the beginning of this year struck by finding in the appendix to what is now a rare book, but fortunately one possessed by the Society,—the Prize Essay by the then secretary of this Society, Mr. John Anderson, W.S., on "Society in the Highlands in 1745, and their Progress until 1825," published in 1827,—the following entry:—

"153. An ancient stone reading-desk, supported on a twisted pillar, found in November 1826 while clearing out the foundations of St. Giles' Parish Church of Edinburgh."—"Small square of stained glass and four copper coins found in the rubbish of St. Giles' Church," with the name of "Isaac Forsyth, Esq., Elgin" as the Donor.

This catalogue is titled *List of Donations presented to the Northern Institution from 23d March 1825 to 28th December 1826*.

This entry not unnaturally excited my curiosity, and on turning to the book I found in the introduction the following explanation of the author's appending the catalogue, containing the entry alluded to:—

"The Northern Institution was established at Inverness in the month of March 1825, for the promotion of Science and Literature in general, and more particularly with the view of investigating the Antiquities and Civil and Natural History of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

"To aid the researches of the members, and to afford to society at large,

throughout the northern districts of the country, facilities for study which did not previously exist, a Museum has been opened by the Institution for the collection and preservation of objects of Natural History, Antiquities, and Works of Art, as well as a Library for scarce and valuable books and manuscripts.

“The central situation and importance of Inverness, and the connection which subsists between its inhabitants and those of various parts of the United Kingdom and the colonies, pointed it out as the most suitable place in which to commence the establishment. From the encouragement which it has received—exceeding the most sanguine expectations of those with whom the measure originated—they have the satisfaction of believing that their anticipations of the benefits likely to result from it, and of the feelings, with which it would be regarded by their countrymen, were well founded. As it is hoped that all interested in the advancement of knowledge, and the improvement of the Highlands, will now be disposed to give their support to the Institution, a list of its members, with a short notice of its proceedings, and of the donations already received, are subjoined in the appendix to this volume, from an examination of which its character and respectability, and the extent of the Museum, may be justly appreciated.

“Circular letters have been distributed over the country, explaining the intentions of the Society, and enumerating a long series of topics connected with the Natural History and Antiquities of the Highlands and Isles, regarding which correct information was yet wanting. An address framed for the purpose of soliciting contributions from abroad, accompanied by an account of the Society’s transactions, has also been printed, and is now on its way to all parts of the world. The addresses of several clergymen, and mercantile gentlemen, who will receive and transmit communications and donations intended for the Institution, are likewise inserted in the appendix.”

To myself and the other gentlemen present, who were privileged to hear the remarks of another Mr. Anderson—the present Keeper of our Museum—in his admirable Rhind Lectures on “Scotland in Early

Christian Times," 1st series, the contrast between their opinions could not fail to obtrude itself.

Our Mr. Anderson then said :—"The collection that is to form the basis of the science must be complete and exhaustive, and to be so it must be national. Every nation that has made progress in archaeology has begun by the recognition of this as the first principle of its action, and ultimate aim of its efforts. Such a collection, although established on a permanent footing as a national institution, must always be to a large extent dependent on the generous co-operation of individuals for its completely exhaustive character. But this is a truly national object, to which every one may contribute as circumstances have placed it in his power, without impoverishing himself, and yet with the certainty of enriching posterity with a legacy of materials which they will have come too late to acquire for themselves. For, be it remembered that the idea of nationality cannot be confined to the existing individuals (who have no monuments and no history), but includes the aggregate in all its relations of space and time. Strip the nation of its monuments and history, and what is there left to be signified by the term national. I think the inference from this is irresistible, and that it is scarcely possible to conceive an object more truly national than that which aims at illustrating the nation's infancy,—preserving the memorials of the unlettered stages of that culture which now speaks in all languages, and the tokens of the primitive condition of that civilisation which now spreads its beneficent influences over all lands.

"The collection thus amassed in the National Museum of Antiquities may therefore be regarded as the great cairn destined to perpetuate to all future generations a knowledge of the civilisation and culture, the arts and industries, the social systems and institutions of our forefathers in the remoter ages. And, as the Society of Antiquaries has acted on the principle which it seeks to inculcate, by making over to the nation as national property the whole of its extensive and valuable collections, it is justified in expecting that every true-hearted Scotsman who may possess similar materials will regard them as a sacred trust, and consider it

his duty to add a stone to the cairn, by laying them as his offering on the altar of his country. The collection, as it now exists, is already important in a scientific point of view, and its capabilities are immensely greater than the opportunities which have been hitherto afforded for their development. But if there were added to it all the specimens that are known to exist in private hands as mere waifs and strays, or in private collections kept in country houses, as odd things found in the neighbourhood, not only would the Museum be largely increased in importance as a National Institution, but it would have taken a long step towards becoming an exhaustive collection. Its scientific value would thus be immeasurably increased, because, as I have shown, the scientific value of a national collection depends entirely on its being completely representative of the area from which it is collected."

Our Mr. Anderson added this among other practical improvements of his subject:—"That we owe it as a duty to our country to transmit to posterity all its monuments and relics of national interest of which our position as the present possessors has constituted us the guardians in trust for all future generations."

This duty recommended itself to me particularly as regarded the relict of St. Giles' which I had thus traced, and I set about inquiries in Inverness as to the grand Museum which the Mr. Anderson of former days had predicted would endure for aye. You may picture my chagrin and regret, when I received from a local correspondent the intelligence that the Museum has long been a thing of the past. "I am sorry to say," he writes, "that I have not yet been able to find the reading-desk, but I do not give up the search. I have found that many of the things which belonged to the Institution have disappeared since the Town Council became curators. Some of the books were sold with the library of one of the teachers in the Academy, some of the swords have found resting places in the dwellings of private citizens, and goodness knows where all the coins have gone! None now remain of what must have been an excellent collection."

Nothing requires to be added to such facts as showing that the views

of Mr. Anderson of to-day are sounder than those of the Mr. Anderson of a former generation. I shall only be too glad if the opportunity you have afforded me of reading this paper should stir up Fellows of this Society in the north, as well as others, to continue the search for the lost Lectern of St. Giles', and should result in its discovery.

At a subsequent meeting Mr. Thoms was able, through the kindness of the Rev. Dr. Gordon of Birnie, F.S.A. Scot., to communicate an Excerpt from the *Inverness Courier* of 17th January 1827, which showed that the missing Lectern was that of St. Giles, *Elgin*, and not Edinburgh. It is still amissing. The coins had, however, been found in the custody of Mr. A. Penrose Hay, Town-Chamberlain of Inverness. He had exhibited them to Mr. Thomas Mackenzie, Sheriff-Substitute of Sutherland, who picked out the coins of the English and Scottish series, and duly catalogued them and returned them with the other coins and his notes and catalogue to Mr. Hay. Mr. Hay added in a note to Mr. Thoms of 10th March 1882:—"I have a faint recollection of having seen the Lectern fifty years ago, in the original rooms of the Museum, but I have reason to believe that it was never transferred to the Academy Hall." Mr. Adam, F.S.A. Scot., Chamberlain of the City of Edinburgh, and a native of Elgin, in a letter to Mr. Thoms as to the Lectern, stated his recollection that "in the centre of the High Street, where now stands a *fine* Grecian Church, stood the Elgin Muckle Kirk—a brave old Gothic structure (older perhaps than Elgin Cathedral)—and dedicated to St. Giles. The Elgin Burgh Seal is the figure of St. Giles, with open book in one hand and crozier in the other, and the motto is '*Sic itur ad astra*,' the same as the Canongate motto. About the very year mentioned as that in which the Lectern was presented to the Inverness Museum, this same old Gothic St. Giles of Elgin was demolished—Goths they were who did so."