

## II.

THE MINOR SOCIETY OF SCOTTISH ANTIQUARIES. BY GEORGE  
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Last autumn I had occasion to visit the Bodleian Library, chiefly in order to examine the manuscript collection that had belonged to Richard Gough, the well-known English antiquary, who died in 1809. My immediate object was to see whether the material that had been gathered for the contemplated third edition of the monumental *Camden* contained any unpublished items of information relating to the occupation of Scotland by the Romans. Unfortunately the quest was not successful. Gough's notes recorded no discoveries that were not already familiar. As a matter of fact, so far as the proposed additions to the Scottish part of the work were concerned, he had drawn mainly upon the original *Statistical Account of Scotland*, the various volumes of which do not seem to have come into his hands until after his edition of 1806 had gone to press. Yet the scrutiny of his papers was not entirely fruitless. It brought to light a curious episode in the early history of our own Society, of sufficient general interest to merit a brief notice.

In glancing over the printed catalogue of the Gough MSS., my eye was caught by the following entry:—

“18309: In English, on paper: written in 1783-5:  $8\frac{1}{4} \times 6\frac{3}{4}$  in., vi+116 pages. The original ‘Minute Book of the Minor Society of Scottish Antiquaries,’ 1 Feb. 1783-13 Aug. 1785.

This volume is not certainly a Gough book.  
Now MS. Gough Scotland 2.”

The thin quarto thus described was sent for, and proved to be still in the marbled covers that had formed its original binding. When it reached the Bodleian, the pagination had run from 3 to 69, but in process of cataloguing there had been added i-vi, 1-2, and 70-116. Page iii was occupied by the title: “The | Minute Book | of the | Minor Society | of Scottish Antiquaries,” while on pages 3-69 there had been entered, in a moderately well-developed hand, the formal record of a series of meetings held in the “Musæum,” at stated intervals, over a period of two and a half years. It was plain that the Major Society whose existence was postulated could be no other than our own. The story of this long-forgotten child, dead and buried for four or five generations, seemed worth a more leisurely investigation than was possible at the moment, and the necessary opportunity was provided by the Council who, on the

matter being reported to them, gave instructions to have a copy of the Minute Book made for preservation among their archives.

There is no minute of the gathering at which the Minor Society was originally constituted. When it met on 1st February 1783, it was already in being, for it plunged at once into the business of balloting for new members and accepting donations for its museum. Apparently, however, the constituent assembly—which we may presume to have been held about the beginning of the year—had consisted of seven persons. Besides forming themselves into a Society and arranging to meet on the first Saturday of each month, those present must have elected the Secretary and the two Vice-Presidents whom we find functioning throughout. A third Vice-Presidentship was created in December, and a couple of months later there were appointed two Censors whose duty it was to “inspect such papers as are given in by any of the Members or others and report to the first meeting after such papers are given in, whether or not they are proper to be read at the meetings of the Society.” No doubt there was also a President, but his name is nowhere mentioned, unless indeed it was the Earl of Buchan for whom this honour was reserved. He had certainly some cognisance of the Minor Society, for express acknowledgment is made of his kindness in securing for it the privilege of using the rooms of the Major Society as headquarters.

The opening minute bears that the Secretary was ordered “to draw up a form of Rules for the Society to be laid before and considered at the next meeting.” On 1st March this was produced accordingly, and was “ordered to lye on the table and some more by Laws to be added.” At the April meeting the draft was read a second time and “finally approven of.” As the rules were never actually engrossed in the book, we are in the dark as to their purport. So far, however, as procedure is concerned, they would appear to have been closely modelled upon our own. That, at all events, is the conclusion suggested by the regular routine of business as reflected in the minutes—election of new members, letters to the Secretary and other competent business, reading of a paper, announcement of donations to the Society’s collections. The likeness to our ‘Proceedings’ is unmistakable, although there is one recurrent phrase that betrays the “prentice hand.” When a newcomer is recommended for election, whether as an ordinary or as a “correspondent” member, it seems always to be, not his name, but he himself that is “order’d to lye on the table to be ballotted for at the next meeting.”

The list of donations almost invariably occupies the lion’s share of the space. These are of the most miscellaneous character. In the voracity of its antiquarian appetite the Minor Society out-groed Captain Grose himself, even if we take the latter at Burns’s valuation; that

of course, was characteristic of the time, and the pages of Smellie's *Account* and of *Archæologia Scotica* show that the Major Society opened its mouth every whit as widely. Coins of many countries and of various ages bulk more largely than anything else. Prehistoric objects are few and far between, but on 3rd January 1784, Mr Graham Spens—one of the keenest and most energetic of the members, who unfortunately died before the Society itself—presented “some human bones which he found in the links of Gullen among a heap of stones which are called cairns.” The minute adds that “there are several about that place,” an observation which the pages of our *Proceedings* amply confirm. More typical of the general character of the collection is the following entry, under date 3rd July 1784:—

“There was presented by Mr Mark Watt a copper Danish skilling of K. Christian the 7<sup>th</sup> dated 1771: a brass British Medal; a set of Gold weights and scales used in the last Century which Mr Mark found on Braid Hills; a small box made of lignum vitæ containing a raisin with a curious twisted branch growing from it and a very large cherry stone which he found in one of the Meadow Parks on the South of Edinburgh.”

The communications read to the Society range over a wide field. The first of which there is any record was “a dissertation upon Eagles in general,” by Mr John Little. As a rule, however, the antiquarian flavour was more distinctly perceptible. Thus we find the Secretary, who was throughout the most voluminous contributor, giving “an account of the Antient Druids,” “a Historical Anecdote of the history of the standing Stone of Kirkhill now Bellmont,” and a paper on “the ancient Monuments and curiosities of Orkney and Shetland,” while there was also an anonymous “Description of the standing stones in the parish of Stainhouse in Orkney.” *Vixere fortes ante Agamemnona*: we have here an anticipation of the Rhind Lectures for 1918. Crimes and bloody happenings of all kinds had an obvious attraction for the members. The Society, for instance, listened to an exposition of the “origin of the quarrell which caused the combat between the M'Phersons and the Davidsons on the North Inch of Perth in the time of King Robert III.” One would like to have imagined Sir Walter Scott, then a boy of twelve, as present on this occasion. But the minutes are most punctilious in noting the presence of strangers, and they lend no countenance to the idea. Kindred subjects of discussion were “the murder of the family of MacIntosh of Tirinie by the Earl of Badenoch and Athole,” and “the Trial of Christian Hamilton for the murder of Lord Forrester anno 1679.” A less exciting theme was “a Copy of a note of a sermon written by one of the predecessors of Mrs Abernethy Drummond in the reign of King William the orriginal

of which is in the possession of the Society of Scottish Antiquaries among a collection of Hawthornden's Manuscripts."

Before it was six months old, the Society realised the need of unbending itself annually. The minute of the meeting held on 7th June 1783 has the following entry:—

"The 5<sup>th</sup> of July being appointed to be held as the anniversary of the Society Mr G. Spens and the Secr. were appointed Stewards to go to the Country to a Gardners and order a Dinner and each Member to have a shilling a piece, which was agreed to."

The idea of dining at a gardener's seems quaint, but is perhaps to be explained by the fact that July was the strawberry season. The experiment at all events was clearly satisfactory, for next year the terms of the motion were much more definite:—

"Moved and agreed to that the Society do keep their Anniversary Dinner at Alexander Pauls Gardener a little to the Southward of the Gibbet Toal."

The Ordnance Survey map of Edinburgh, published in 1853, shows the "Old Gibbet Toll" as situated on the left-hand side of the Dalkeith Road, immediately opposite the "Newington Burial Ground," at the junction with the "Gibbet Loan," as the thoroughfare that now bears the innocent name of Park Road was then called. In point of distance, therefore, the Society's excursions were planned upon a modest scale. Whatever the fare, it was ample enough to engender a pleasing sense of self-satisfaction. The Chairman's annual address is always reproduced at length in the minutes, and this is the peroration of that delivered by Mr John Dick in 1783:—

"Finally, Gentlemen, we have crowned the honours and fame of our labour by the institution of this anniversary meeting, where the Members of this Society of all ranks and fortune may sit down to a social feast of literature and partake of the bounties of our native soil without luxury intemperance or inadmissible expense."

In 1784 the date of the anniversary meeting was changed, the Society having on 3rd July adopted a motion made by Mr John Bannatyne to the effect—

"that as there were so few Members present the Society should not hold their Anniversary till the 14<sup>th</sup> of August next being the first Saturday after the Races and that the Society should ever after keep their Anniversary upon the first Saturday of August and if that day should happen to be in the Race week, the Saturday thereafter."

The small attendance here referred to—it was a *sederunt* of only three in all—must be regarded as something of a portent. The speech of Mr George Hay, the chairman at the ensuing anniversary, strikes a

note that had not been audible in the "glad, confident morning" of a year before:—

"Having now, Gentlemen, made such remarks as I thought it my duty to do this day, I must express my anxious wish that the future and increasing zeal of every Member of this society to promote the laudable objects we have in view will enable us to become a more and more respectable as we gradually become a more numerous body."

The membership, it should be explained, ordinary and "correspondent" taken together, was at this time about twenty. The aspiration after respectability is perhaps not unconnected with a motion of which the speaker had given notice earlier in the day:—

"That every Ordinary and Honorary Member shall pay to the funds [of] the Society the sum of two shillings a year to be paid every quarter or three months and the first payment to be made on the first meeting of the Society in October."

Hitherto there had been no subscription at all. When the resolution came up for discussion, it was unanimously adopted. The financial provision thus made would seem to have been too generous, for on 11th June 1785—that is, before a full year's contributions had been levied—Mr Gilbert Sandy, one of the Vice-Presidents,

"moved that instead of the members making a quarterly payment to the funds of the Society they shall at the Anniversary meeting or the meeting immediately following pay whatever sum is requisite for the purposes of the Society or whatever shall be agreed upon, which was unanimously agreed to and the Secretary ordered to return to the Members the contributions any of them had made."

As the Society sat rent-free and published no transactions, and as the individual members paid each his share of the anniversary dinner, it is not at first sight clear why finance should have been a problem at all. A possible outlet for the money is, however, suggested by the following letter, addressed by Mr Francis Wemyss, a "correspondent" member, to the chairman of the meeting at which the resolution just quoted was introduced and carried:—

"The many curiosities I have seen when abroad and which my circumstances would not permit me to purchase induce me to make a proposal to you and the Gentlemen of this Society. That every correspondent Member should be bound by oath to make purchase of such curiosities as may be of real service to this most respectable Society, or such as his situation at the time enables him to procure making it a rule if such curiosity exceeds the sum of 5 shillings sterling that the said Member be reimbursed in the overplus of that sum from the funds of this Society on examination of the said curiosity he brings.

For I assure you Sir that many curiosities which were entirely out of my power to purchase would have been valuable acquisitions to this Society. At the same time I would have the Member restricted to a

certain sum which he must not exceed by any means unless from his own pocket.

I would wish if this proposal be seconded that it pass immediately as I expect to be called to London every Post."

The suggestion thus set forth was adopted with acclamation, and the limit of price fixed at "eight shillings sterling." A little later a further attempt to raise the wind was combined with an endeavour to improve the attendance. It was decided to impose a fine of sixpence upon all members who were absent without reasonable excuse. At this time the meetings were being held weekly in order to make up for the winter's inactivity. The Society had not met between 2nd October 1784 and 28th May 1785, "on account of the great distress in Mr Cummyng's family," Mr Cummyng being (as we shall see presently) the Secretary. But this unwonted outburst of energy was merely the flicker of the dying lamp. The Anniversary was duly celebrated in August. The record of that event closes with the words:—"Adjourn the meeting of this Society untill the                      day of September 1785." Before September came the Society seems to have dissolved—how and why we cannot tell. The minutes end abruptly there, and the rest of the book is blank.

Such is the story of the Minor Society of Scottish Antiquaries as revealed by its own records. Before leaving it, one is tempted to ask what justification there was for its existence. That depends to some extent upon who its members were. To find this out, we must have recourse to the methods of the higher criticism. In one instance, at least, the result is surprising. Under the date 3rd April 1784, we read:—

"There was presented by Mr Gilbert Sandy a Pair of steel spurs plated with silver which belonged to K. Charles II. and which he left together with his Cloaths after his defeat at Worcester by Oliver Cromwell anno 1651 in the house of Mr Nasmith a Colonel in his Army in Staffordshire, which were divided among his attendants of whom Mr Gilbert's Grandfather then a Major in the King's own regiment was one and to whose share the boots and spurs fell. The King escaped to France in the disguise of a soldier in Cromwell's party."

Now if Mr Gilbert Sandy's grandfather was old enough to be a major in 1651, Mr Gilbert himself must have been something of a patriarch when he joined the Minor Society more than a hundred and thirty years later, and he and his fellow-members can only have been a group of superannuated antiquaries. That, however, would be quite inconsistent with the general flavour of the proceedings, which smack strongly of youth. Yet it is not exactly a set of schoolboys with whose doings we have been dealing. They have seen too much of the world for that to be the case. Mr Francis Wemyss, it will be remembered, had been a good deal abroad, and Mr Gilbert Sandy presented curiosities which he had brought home from Norway and from Portugal, while on one

occasion a member (who desired to remain anonymous) asked the Society whether they would be at the expense of paying the postage of a letter which he would send home recounting the results of his observations in the Mediterranean. One may conjecture that they were lads let loose from school, but not yet sufficiently mature to aspire to the dignity of membership in the Society proper.

The identity of one or two of them can be more or less confidently established. Thus, Mr George Hay, the second Vice-President, and Mr James Hamilton were probably the sons of Mrs Hay of Mountblair and Mrs Hamilton, jun., of Olivebank, both of whom figure in the list of donors. Again, it is safe to recognise Mr John Fell, who was a generous contributor of Chinese objects and Oriental articles of dress to the common stock, in the "Mr John Fell, Writer, Bombay," who was elected a corresponding member of the Major Society on 16th February 1796, more than a decade after the Minor Society had ceased to be. And there is no manner of doubt about the Secretary, Mr Thomas Cummyng. He was the son of Mr James Cummyng, clerk in the Lyon Office. Mr Cummyng, senior, was the first Secretary of our Society as well as Curator of its Museum in the Cowgate, where he and his family occupied rooms in the Society's premises. That explains the prolonged adjournment already alluded to, as well as the Secretary's omission to call a meeting in May 1784, "on account of the indisposition of his Father all last Month." When there was illness in the house, it was undesirable to have the young people coming about it unnecessarily.

Furthermore, I am inclined to find in this link between the two Societies a clue to the origin of the junior one. In his address to our Society on 6th August 1782, the Earl of Buchan said:—"I recommend it to you (in this case) to provide a small but adequate salary to your Secretary, who is quixotically zealous in your service; but who, like other men, must eat and drink, and maintain a family, which I hope sometime or other may breed new secretaries and new members for the Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland."<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the formation of the Minor Society a very few months later was an attempt to live up to the hint here given. There is a final question, which must remain unanswered. How did the Minute-Book come to find a place among the manuscript treasures of the University of Oxford? The Register, it will be remembered, says that it is "not certainly a Gough book," and Mr Madan, Bodley's Librarian, to whose kindness I am much indebted, tells me that "the MS. is not in the printed Gough Catalogue of 1814." Nevertheless he believes that it came to the Bodleian through Gough. And there we must leave the matter.

<sup>1</sup> *Arch. Scot.*, iii., App. i., pp. xi f.