

## VIII

SIR GEORGE MACDONALD, K.C.B.: 1862-1940.

### A MEMOIR

By JAMES CURLE, LL.D., F.S.A.Scot., F.S.A.

George Macdonald was born in 1862 in Elgin, his father, Dr James Macdonald, being at the time a master in the Elgin Academy. In the same year his parents moved to Ayr, where Dr Macdonald had been appointed Rector of Ayr Academy. Dr James Macdonald was a scholar and an antiquary. He joined the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1874, and served on the council. He assisted in the excavation of the Roman Fort at Birrens, and contributed to the *Proceedings* a study of the inscribed stones found there. He held the Rhind Lectureship in Archæology in 1896. His interest in the Antonine Vallum is commemorated in his *Tituli Hunteriani, An Account of the Roman Stones in the Hunterian Museum*.

George Macdonald thus from his earliest days was brought up in an atmosphere of scholarship and archæology, which surrounded him for the rest of his life.

At Ayr Academy he received his early education. From Ayr he went to the University of Edinburgh, where in 1882 he graduated as Master of Arts with First Class Honours in Classics, and obtained a scholarship as the most distinguished graduate of the year in the Classical Department. A period of study in Germany followed, and then returning to Edinburgh in 1883 he gained the Ferguson Scholarship in Classics. The greater part of the next winter was spent in Rome, and in 1884 he matriculated at Balliol College, Oxford, where he attained distinction, being placed in the First Class in Classical Moderations in 1885 and in the Final School of Literæ Humaniores in 1887. On his return to Scotland he served for a time as a master in the Kelvinside Academy, Glasgow,

where his father then held the post of Rector. In 1892 he joined the staff of Glasgow University, becoming Senior Assistant to Professor Gilbert Murray, who held the Chair of Greek.

It was no doubt due to his knowledge of Greek literature and history that in 1893 Macdonald was appointed by the University as Honorary Curator of the Hunterian Coin Cabinet, an appointment which was to have a profound influence on his future career. The magnificent Hunterian Collection, which had been practically buried, became under his curatorship once more accessible to scholars all over the world. The first volume of his *Catalogue of the Greek Coins in the Hunterian Collection, University of Glasgow*, appeared in 1899, the second and third volumes following in 1901 and 1906. The work was received with enthusiasm, and established his authority as a numismatist. The book was "crowned" by the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, and he was awarded the Prix Allier de Hauteroche.

His tenure of office as Curator only ended with his life. In addition to many contributions to numismatic literature he published his volume on *Coin Types*, the subject of the Rhind Lectures for 1904, a singularly lucid and judicial summing up of the questions concerned, and in 1916, in a more popular form, his *Evolution of Coinage*. His work on numismatics brought him the honorary membership of many societies, and a reputation in both Europe and America. He was Medallist of the Royal Numismatic Society in 1913 and of the American Numismatic Society in 1926.

In 1902 Macdonald resigned his Assistantship in Glasgow University and joined the Scottish Education Department, but his success as an organiser and the eminence he attained in the public service lie beyond the scope of this short Memoir.

When he turned to the study of Roman Archæology he possessed an equipment such as has rarely fallen to the lot of Scottish antiquaries. In addition to an eminently judicial mind and broad general culture his studies in coins had trained him in habits of minute and careful observation. He took no part in the excavation of Birrens in 1895, being occupied with his numismatic studies; but he tells us that he heard "much talk about it and about," and we may feel sure that in his father's house the Antonine Wall Report of the Glasgow Archæological Society issued in 1899 was the subject of interested discussion. He was not adventuring into an unknown country when he came in 1902 to assist in Mr Whitelaw's excavation of the Roman Fort on the Bar Hill, Dumbartonshire, and to join Mr Park in writing the Report.

This fort occupied the highest point of the Antonine *Limes* midway between the Forth and Clyde, standing high above the valley which from east to west traverses the isthmus. By a piece of rare good fortune,

on the very first day of their operations the workmen lit upon the well. Its contents could not fail to kindle the imagination of an antiquary. From it came the broken sandstone columns which must have lined the courtyard of the *Principia*: the dedicatory tablet of the Baetasian Cohort that had once occupied the fort, and their altar which had stood in the shrine, and with these a strange collection of miscellaneous objects, including a great amphora, tools, bridle-bits, and worn shoes—familiar personal belongings which coming back to the light of day seemed to bring with them the very presence of the long-vanished garrison that once kept watch across the valley to the northern hills, in whose shadow *latrunculi* might be gathering. Not only did the work reveal the denizens of the fort, but lying below the foundations of the Antonine buildings it uncovered for the first time the outlines of a small outpost which must have been one of Agricola's *praesidia*. The report of the excavation showed a marked advance in the style of such publications, the little fort stood out against its historic background, the narrative was clear, and it was eminently readable.

Although numismatics remained a source of abiding interest to Macdonald, the episode of the excavation of Bar Hill proved a turning-point in his career, and more and more he devoted the leisure of a busy life to the study of Roman Britain. The first result of his introduction to the Antonine Vallum came in 1908 in an invitation to deliver the Dalrymple Lectures in the University of Glasgow. These lectures, given in the spring of 1910, formed the main thread of his *Roman Wall in Scotland*, published in the following year, and dedicated to the memory of his father—*Caledoniae Romanae indagatori studiosissimo*. Among those whose help is recorded in the preface is the name of Professor Francis Haverfield, whose stimulating enthusiasm in the investigation of Roman Britain was to constitute a bond of interest and of friendship broken only by Haverfield's untimely death.

In *The Roman Wall in Scotland* all the information then available was brought together, but the book was designed to be more than a mere archaeological record, for no one realised better than the author that here literature and history must go hand in hand with archaeology. "For those who embark on the study," he writes in his *Agricola in Britain*, "a sound discipline in history is an indispensable prerequisite and some acquaintance with literature an immense advantage." He sketched the literary and historic background, including the organisation of the Roman Army. The records of older antiquaries were laid under contribution. The course of the Wall and the sites of the forts, many of them wellnigh forgotten, were surveyed and approximately fixed, and the inscriptions reinterpreted. But on the Wall excavation had hardly begun to play its part. Except for the examination of its structure undertaken by the

Glasgow Archæological Society, there had been little spade-work done. Prior to the work at Bar Hill only two of the forts, Castle Cary and Rough Castle, had been excavated; although much careful work had been done at these, the time available was short, and the experience of those in charge of the work was insufficient to recover all that was to be learned from the sites. The need for fuller investigation was clamant. Macdonald closed his final chapter with a plea for the awakening of the public conscience to the fact that a national monument was in danger, at some points in grave danger, of being entirely swept away, and for the organisation, ere it was too late, of a proper examination of the sites that still admitted of search. He held that a thorough investigation of the *Limes* would go far to enable the complete story of the Roman occupation of the country to be fully recovered. The second edition of *The Roman Wall in Scotland* shows the response to this plea, and how largely that response was due to his own efforts.

He followed with interest the work carried on at Newstead between the years 1905 and 1910, where below the Antonine fort the outlines of Agricolan earthworks were traced, and where for the first time the study of the pottery gave a clue to distinguish the sites occupied during the Flavian advance from those of the Antonine period. He read the proofs of *A Roman Frontier Post* in which the results were published and made many helpful suggestions, besides contributing a careful study of the coins found. The collection, varying from legionary *denarii* to a coin of Crispina, was the largest gathered from an excavated site in Scotland. It gave him the opportunity to review the numismatic evidence of the length of the Roman occupation of Caledonia, and, besides finding in the Newstead coins additional proof of Haverfield's contention that the occupation had come to an end in the reign of Marcus Aurelius or early in that of Commodus, he was led to conclude that the territory conquered by Agricola was not relinquished on his recall, which occurred not later than A.D. 85, but must have been held after the accession of Trajan in A.D. 98. His acute analysis of the plans of Inchtuthill, Ardoch and Camelon published in 1919 in his *Agricolan Occupation of North Britain* gave further support to this conclusion, which controversy did not lead him to abandon.

In 1912 he was invited by the Treasury to report, with a view to settling the ownership, on an important find of gold coins discovered in the course of the excavations at Corbridge. It was his first experience of the many problems offered by Hadrian's Wall and the sites which lay behind it. Incidentally it brought him into touch with Haverfield, whose enthusiasm was the mainspring of the undertaking. His report<sup>1</sup> is an excellent example of his skill in weighing evidence, of his wide scholarship,

<sup>1</sup> The Corbridge Gold Find of 1911.

and of his dry humour, a quality hardly to be looked for in a document of the kind.

But the Antonine Wall and the occupation of Caledonia were never far from his thoughts. The excavation of Balmuildy, undertaken in 1912 by Mr Miller for the Glasgow Archaeological Society, provided the first instalment of the work that he was so anxious to see carried out. Mr Miller recovered an admirable plan of a fort. The position of the administrative buildings and the sites of the barracks were ascertained, and there were bath-houses both within and outside the defences. The work was described in an exhaustive report. The examination of the forts at Old Kilpatrick, Mumrills, Cadder and Croy Hill was to follow. Balmuildy could not but give a fresh impetus to his interest in the study of the Wall, and especially from 1913 onwards he began a single-handed effort, which continued as opportunity offered during the twenty years that followed, to solve its problems. Needless to say he traversed the whole line several times on foot. Those who shared his enthusiasm and accompanied him on his expeditions can testify to his powers of endurance, which neither rain nor bitter winds could abate. Something of the tenacity with which he carried on his quest may be seen from his paper of 1915 on *Discoveries on the Line of the Antonine Wall*. He had traced the Wall to its western end, and was trying to ascertain the dimensions of the fort at Old Kilpatrick.

Next day—Saturday, December 27th—was the last I could spare for the work at this particular time. Unfortunately the weather was so bad that it could hardly have been worse. It was blowing half a gale, the field was partially flooded, and wild showers of sleet made digging almost impossible.

But his survey, carried out in good weather and in bad, cleared up many doubtful points and practically established the line from sea to sea.

It was characteristic of his method that no source of evidence bearing on his studies was neglected. Gordon, Horsley, Maitland or the writers of the *Statistical Account of Scotland* might give some indication of the position of long-levelled ramparts or ditches. But of all the earlier observers none was more helpful than General Roy, who had the merit of being not only a zealous antiquary but a trained surveyor. His interest in Roy's work led him to a study of the General's journeys in search of Roman earthworks and to make a careful collation of his manuscripts and plans. His researches, under the title "General William Roy and his *Military Antiquities of the Romans in North Britain*," appeared appropriately in the *Archæologia* of the Society of Antiquaries of London, to whom we are indebted for the publication of Roy's archæological classic.

The death of Francis Haverfield in 1919 brought a long and close friendship to an end. No one in his day had done more to encourage

the study of Roman Britain and to gather together the details of the latest discoveries, and yet the great work on the Northumbrian Wall which he might have written never saw the light. In 1907 he gave in Oxford his brilliant Ford Lectures on "The Roman Occupation of Britain." He had intended to issue them in a revised and expanded form, but little work had been done at the time of his death to prepare them for publication. Macdonald, with characteristic devotion and skill, was able with the aid of his notes to recast and publish the lectures, preceded by a sympathetic biographical sketch, a fitting tribute to their friendship.

Although Macdonald made no claim to expert knowledge in epigraphy, something of Haverfield's mantle fell upon his shoulders, and more and more his sound judgment and wide knowledge added to his correspondence and to his friendships.

In 1923 he sent his first contribution to Pauly-Wissowa's *Realencyclopädie*, and his articles followed regularly to the end of his life. His numismatic studies had already brought him into contact with German scholars, and his researches on the Antonine Wall led him naturally to follow the work carried out on the Roman *Limes* in Germany. In 1927 he was invited to assist in the celebration of the semi-jubilee of the Römisch-germanische Kommission at Frankfurt, which he attended and read an important paper in which he discussed the coast defences of Britain known as the forts of the Saxon Shore (*Die Küstenverteidigung Britanniens gegen das Ende der römischen Herrschaft*).

In 1928 he had the pleasure of welcoming Professor Fabricius, the distinguished director of the *Limes* Commission, to Scotland, and acting as his guide to the Antonine Wall. Two years later he contributed to the Commission's Report an admirable synthesis of the results obtained on Roman British sites between the years 1914 and 1928. His paper embraced a wide survey of excavations, ranging from the legionary fortress at Caerleon and the Wall of Hadrian to the towers built on the headlands of the Yorkshire coast to guard against those pirate raids that with the weakening of the Roman power brought insecurity to the Province (*Forschungen im römischen Britannien 1914-1928*). The article was reprinted in English as a Supplemental Paper (No. VI) of the *British Academy*.

In 1926 he had been elected an Honorary Member of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and in the following year, on the formation of the Clayton Memorial Trust, he became one of the Trustees. The Trust had under its care the fine collection of inscribed stones and other relics gathered together from sites on Hadrian's Wall, and housed in the Museum at Chesters. The work of the Trust brought him closely into touch with a younger generation of archæologists, keenly interested in working out the history of Hadrian's Wall, and who valued his co-

operation. It led in 1930 to his taking part in the decennial pilgrimage along the Wall and contributing his paper on *The Bath-house at the Fort of Chesters (Cilurnum)*, in which, aided by the knowledge he had gained of such buildings at Mumrills, he drew from the ruined walls a masterly reconstruction of a Roman bath.

The information gathered during more than twenty years was brought together in the second edition of his *Roman Wall in Scotland*, published in 1934. In its general plan the volume differed little from its predecessor; there was the same marshalling of all the available evidence, and the same clear logical deduction, but the material available had enormously increased. His surveys had borne fruit, and many new discoveries had been made. The sites of six more of the forts had been confirmed, and five of these had been investigated. Not only had he followed with untiring interest all work in progress, but at Mumrills, where he shared the direction of the excavation with Dr A. O. Curle, he had taken an active part, and at Croy Hill and Westerwood he had borne the sole responsibility. He had likewise himself cleared up many obscure points on the Wall as a whole.

In the years that had passed since he came to Bar Hill he had gained practical experience, and to his equipment as a scholar he had added that of a first-rate field archaeologist.

The Roman forts in Scotland, as indeed throughout Britain, have almost invariably shown signs of alteration and rebuilding, and no more difficult problem presents itself to the excavator than to extract from masses of disturbed wall-foundations or from post-holes the story of their vicissitudes. The plans of Mumrills, of Rough Castle, or of Croy Hill exhibit Macdonald's patient weighing of evidence, and his remarkable skill in interpreting a confused and difficult site. His acute powers of observation are shown in his revised survey of the Wall, for example by his discovery that east of the road leading northwards to Camelon the turf structure of the Wall was replaced by earth, with a stiffening of wrought clay; by his deduction that it here passed through forest land where turf was scarce, a tract of country that nourished the wolf, the red deer and the wild cat, whose presence was attested at Mumrills; or again by his interpretation of the distance slabs telling of the companies drawn from three legions digging the great ditch and building the Wall gradually working from the Forth to the Clyde, each performing its allotted task until the impenetrable basalt of Croy Hill upset their measured progress.

Admittedly the problems of the Antonine Wall were simpler than those of the German *Limes*. The period of occupation was much shorter than that of the Tyne and Solway barrier, nor did the remains present the same complexity of structure. But even allowing for these qualifications,

Macdonald's work must always remain a remarkable achievement, and it may safely be said that of all the frontier lines of the Roman Empire none have received within the compass of a single volume a presentation so scholarly and so complete.

In 1936 he contributed to these *Proceedings* "A Further Note on the Roman Fort at Croy Hill." The removal of an old cottage, which had encumbered the site in 1931, made it possible to search for interior buildings. The plan of the *Principia* and of one granary was recovered. He attained his results with what seems a minimum of effort. We can see with what reverence he approached the site, and his care that no stone should be disturbed unnecessarily, and that no foundations should be left uncovered to suffer irreparable destruction as at Inchtuthill and Rough Castle. An illustration in the text shows him in a characteristic attitude standing with the workmen on the snow-covered ground. Except for a visit to Bridgeness in the following year, it was the end of his work on the Antonine Wall.

In the autumn of 1937 his health began to fail. He suffered from an attack of asthma, after which symptoms of cardiac disorder began to show themselves and gradually more and more curtailed his activities. With characteristic courage and tenacity he continued to work, carrying on his wide correspondence and never relinquishing his grasp of the affairs of the Society or of the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments. Notwithstanding increasing disability he continued his contributions to archæological literature. His last paper read to the Society, "Miscellanea Romano-Caledonica II," written in 1939, brought him back to familiar ground. Among the contents is a final list of Roman coins found in Scotland, a note on the great marching-camp at Raedykes in Kincardineshire, and a critical examination of recent excavations at Birrens in which he vigorously sets aside the plea for a third-century occupation.

Though debarred from active work in the field, he followed with sympathetic interest the doings of others. Mr Richmond's skilful uncovering of the fort at Fendoch was a source of pleasure. Here for the first time, by the observation of post-holes and sleeper trenches, it had been possible to plan the wooden buildings of a Flavian fort, planted to hold a gateway to the Caledonian wilds. In the west, too, new sites were being discovered. In Annandale and Clydesdale roads were being traced; even in Ayrshire, at Loudon Hill, a fort had been discovered giving indications both of a Flavian and of an Antonine occupation. Did Agricola's campaigns after all lead him into the west? Did he reach the Ayrshire coast and look across the waters to that distant Hibernia that he would fain have added to his conquests? There were more chapters to be written in the history of the Roman occupation. The quest for which he had done so much must still go on. There was work for a younger generation.



In the summer of 1940, although he continued to work with undiminished mental vigour, it was clear to his friends that under the stress of his long illness, which he had borne uncomplainingly, his strength was failing. On the 9th of August a sudden seizure brought his life to an end.

Many honours came to Macdonald in addition to those of which mention has already been made. He was created a Companion of the Bath in 1916, and a Knight Commander of the Bath in 1927, a fit recognition of his work in the public service. The Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh conferred upon him their Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws. From Oxford and from Cambridge he received the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters. He was a Fellow of the British Academy, an Honorary Fellow of Balliol and of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, an Honorary Member of the Royal Scottish Academy, and a Trustee for the National Library of Scotland. He joined the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1900; served on the council and held the office of President from 1933 to his death. As President he entered wholeheartedly into the affairs of the Society. While his health permitted he was seldom absent from its meetings or failed to contribute to its papers or discussions. In 1936, and again in 1937, he enlivened the somewhat dull formality of its annual meeting by reviving the custom of a Presidential Address which had long been in abeyance. He was a member of the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies from its beginning in 1911, and one of its first Vice-Presidents. As a member of the Editing Committee he took an active part in all its work and his contributions to it were important. He served as President for the years 1921-26. On the occasion of his seventieth birthday, in 1932, the annual volume of the Society's *Journal* was dedicated to him as a tribute to a distinguished scholar and in recognition of the work that he had done on behalf of historical knowledge. A bibliography of his writings was included.

From 1924 he had been a member of the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. On the retirement of Sir Herbert Maxwell in 1934 he succeeded him as Chairman. The services that he rendered to the Commission were of great value. He had an unrivalled knowledge of the ways of Government Departments, and, what was still more important, he possessed the confidence of those in office. He threw himself heartily into the work of the Commission, writing and revising its reports, and watching its surveys in progress. In the summers of 1932, 1933 and 1935 he visited Shetland and Orkney, and took part in this work. Characteristic of the breadth of his interests are his papers on Shetland tombstones, among them the recumbent slabs at Lundawick in the island of Unst, with their epitaphs in Low German commemorating burghesses of Bremen who in the sixteenth century had plied their trade in the northern isles.

He occupied the post of President of the Classical Association (England and Wales), of the similar Association in Scotland, and of the Royal Numismatic Society. He presided over the Anthropological Section of the British Association at its meeting in Edinburgh in 1928. He was a member of the Royal Commission on Museums and Galleries 1927-29, and of the Standing Commission which carried on its work, as also of the University Grants Commission. He served on the Ancient Monuments Board for Scotland and on the Royal Fine Art Commission for Scotland. On the Continent, in addition to his honorary membership of many Numismatic Societies, he was a corresponding member of the Berlin Academy of Sciences, and a member of the German Archæological Institute.

George Macdonald was tall, though a scholar's stoop somewhat detracted from his height. While he did not convey the impression of great strength he was possessed of no inconsiderable powers of endurance. His memory was retentive. He left few notes behind him. He had the power of gathering his facts in his mind in an orderly fashion, and when he came to write, his prose was clear, direct and logical, requiring little alteration or revision. His insistence on sound evidence and his power of deducing therefrom every possible conclusion were characteristic of his work. He had read much, not only in the classics but in European literature, and his fund of knowledge was great. Around him there was a certain aura of shyness, and there were times when he seemed to retire into himself, but this was due in no small measure to partial deafness, which had affected him all his life. To a sympathetic listener he loved to talk and discuss the latest news of discoveries bearing on his favourite studies. He had a sense of humour which welled up quietly but which was none the less very genuine. He was a friend to all who came to him for help, and his good nature must have imposed on him many a burden of editing and of reading proof-sheets, which he seldom touched without adding clarity. He was very patient in giving help and in discussion, yet it could not be said that he suffered fools gladly. He did not seek controversy, but, being involved in it, the forces that he could deploy were formidable. On the many public bodies on which he served his wise, far-seeing outlook inevitably brought him to the front and made him a valued colleague. In whatever sphere he was engaged, he gave of his best. He was an industrious worker, and what he undertook he completed. He leaves behind him the memory of a great scholar, a man of calm and deliberate judgment, a wise friend, and the most accomplished Scottish antiquary of his generation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Society is indebted to Messrs Emery Walker Ltd. for the block of Pl. LIII and to the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies for permitting its reproduction.





*Geo: Macdonald*  
*1932*

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