

## MEMORIAL OF PROFESSOR V. GORDON CHILDE.

Professor V. Gordon Childe's achievements in comprehending European and Near Eastern archæology in a connected narrative in which Scotland has a place have been fully recognised and assessed by others more competent than the present writer to do so.<sup>1</sup> It is fitting to consider here, however briefly, what he did for Scottish archæology as a Fellow of this Society and as the first occupant of the first and still the only chair of archæology in Scotland.

When Professor Childe was elected to the new Abercromby Chair of Prehistoric Archæology in the University of Edinburgh in 1927 the innovation was not regarded with enthusiasm by some. The archæological atmosphere in which he was to work with such conspicuous and unexpected success was affected by two circumstances. It is essential to realise what they were for a true appreciation of the debt we owe him. It is not for the vicarious credit for having had him in our midst that we are indebted. Firstly, there had hitherto been no formal instruction in archæology anywhere in Scotland (and there was little enough in England) and the very notion of teaching the subject, to turn out professional or career-archæologists, and moreover of inviting an outsider to undertake the task, was wholly at variance with the liberal traditions and outlook of a devoted and learned but none the less essentially amateur scholarship. Secondly, the influence of this scholarship was virtually confined to Scotland and even at its most expansive in the works of such exponents as Abercrombie, Bryce, Giekie and Anderson, who looked with surmise upon the past with eyes which sought further than Scottish horizons, it was essentially descriptive. No inferences placed the Scottish prehistoric narrative in a wider European setting. This indeed was inevitable, for Scottish archæology had but tentatively advanced beyond the preliminary practical stage of collection and description. The most far-seeing scholars could still lament the unimaginative accumulation of finds which lacked the associated information without which their significance could not be assessed nor knowledge increased. "The first question must always be—What are the Facts?" said Joseph Anderson in his inspiring first Rhind lecture in 1879, percipiently entitled "The means of obtaining a scientific basis for the archæology of Scotland."

The decade between 1880 and 1890 must have been immensely exciting for those interested in the antiquities of Scotland. Anderson's four volumes of Rhind lectures on Early Christian and Pagan Scotland, Skene's three volumes on Celtic Scotland, Munro's *Ancient Scottish Lake Dwellings* and the incomparable eight volumes of MacGibbon and Ross on historical architecture appeared in this period, to be followed by Giekie's *Great Ice Age* in 1894 and Romilly Allen's majestic *Early Christian Monuments* in 1903. And how well they wrote. Many worthy papers followed in the next twenty-five years and to these our *Proceedings* bear ample witness, but no comprehensive archæological review to supersede the pioneer works was published<sup>2</sup> in spite of a rapidly increasing capital of fact and opinion until Gordon Childe arrived. It was then possible to present the Scottish prehistoric scene against a European background, and this was itself of Childe's

<sup>1</sup> See especially *Antiquity*, xxxii, No. 126 (1958), 65-79, and complete Bibliography *P.P.S.*, xxi (1955), 295-304.

<sup>2</sup> The Rhind lectures of 1918, "Prehistoric Monuments of Scotland," by A. O. Curle, is an unpublished MS. in the library of the Society.

own composition. Against the illuminating *Dawn* the outlines of Scotland's prehistory were discerned.

It was one of the memorable triumphs of Childe, and one most endearing to us, that he quickly became more Scottish than the Scots and with indefatigable energy and inquiring spirit was closely associated for many years and on many undertakings with the interested amateur whose decline his advent had been said to proclaim. With the publication in 1935 of *The Prehistory of Scotland* he put Scotland boldly on the archæological map. In that volume, which pays generous tribute in its preface to the works of Gekie, Munro, Abercrombie and Bryce, it is noteworthy that he begins with a long geographical dissertation. The influences of geography and geology were ever foremost in his mind and in his teachings. His excursions throughout Scotland were frequent and prolonged and his archæological fieldwork was extensive. Although as he himself confessed with characteristic modesty, his most useful contributions to prehistory were "not novel data rescued by brilliant excavation from the soil or by patient research from dusty museum cases but rather interpretative concepts and methods of explanation," his attitude to his subject was far from being confined to the library. He knew at first-hand the sites he mentions in his writings, his excavations were widespread. The Highlands, the Lowlands and the Islands were as familiar to him in bad weather as in good.

In the year following his inauguration he published an article on *Relics of Human Sacrifice in the Orkneys*, and to the archipelago he returned time and time again for thirty years. His last excavation was at Maes Howe in 1954-5, his second-last on the island of Sanday. In the far north he is remembered with high regard and vivid reminiscence for it was characteristic of the man to win affection among those with whom he worked and lived, albeit their reactions to his personality are not innocent of wonder and humour. To them he was every inch the professor. The Stromness landlady who looked after him during the epic days of Skara Brae commiserated with genuine solicitude on how the poor man never ate, too upset when he didn't find anything, too excited when he did. This site one supposes is now world famous. To dig it from the sand which had engulfed it was an exacting and uncommonly complicated task. Its excavation, hampered by considerations of subsequent conservation, argues some excavating skill and was certainly a presentation of "novel data from the soil."

The final report on Skara Brae was published in the *Proceedings* in 1931. In the same volume he contributed a second report on a chambered cairn at Kindrochat in Perthshire. The next year's *Proceedings* contain excavation reports of two Iron Age forts in Berwickshire and a paper on chambered cairns in Argyll. And so on, from then each volume contains with almost yearly regularity at least one distinguished contribution from Childe save conspicuously in 1935 and 1940 in which years respectively he brought out *The Prehistory of Scotland* and *Prehistoric Communities of the British Isles* in which Scotland is conspicuously featured.

*The Prehistory* is now outdated, and it is not commended in current assessments of Childe's stature. Yet its importance was great. It afforded for the first generation of university-trained archæologists a text-book which completely transformed Scottish archæological studies. Although ostensibly written for a wide public to the student of the mid-thirties it was absolutely indispensable and may well have been written expressly for him, for nothing like it existed in the archæological literature of Scotland. The complexities of the national ethos were presented as never before. The invasions and migrations which are part of

the story (and whose effects and significance Childe could not subsequently deny even when he modified his interpretations of them) are in this book set forth with abundant detail to demonstrate the impact of foreign cultures, la Tene, Hallstatt and so forth upon the internal development of Scottish society in strictly scientific style. This book gave not only a new meaning to Scottish archaeological evidence but enhanced the value of English and foreign text-books which now constituted a valid framework of reference for this evidence.

Himself a philologist, Childe saw archaeology as a scientific discipline. Characteristically the curriculum he composed was for a B.Sc. degree. Apart from archaeology there was a bias on geology, and honours' students did first-year anatomy also. The renowned experiments in vitrification at Plean and Rahoy in 1937 were cautiously reported as "The experimental production of the phenomena distinctive of vitrified forts" and demonstrate the empirical scientific method of trial and observation.

Excavation technique he did not teach latterly, and students he despatched to excavations elsewhere, but fieldwork played a prominent part in his course. Excursions to the hill-forts and hut-circles of the Lammermoors and Borders were adventures annually enjoyed by some and dreaded by others. The nonchalance of his driving, and the back of his car (a thing of great power), which contained a weird miscellany of bones, trowels, potshards, old macintoshes and strangely always a coat-hanger deeply affected those who merely took the course as a cognate subject. His classroom lectures were not memorable, but a recollection readily comes to mind of a post-glacial lecture delivered from beneath an umbrella, while a leaking ceiling, reprehensibly ignored by a deaf and indifferent Senate, dripped steadily upon it.

He was a man of reserved character, not easy to know. But a professor who invited one to his residence, spoke apparently most European languages and read them all, understood the chemistry of the Bronze age, discoursed on Handel's Variations with records, read the classics with ease and enjoyment and taught one how to do long division in Latin numerals made an inspiring impact on the mind. His books were ill-assorted and upside down upon his shelves and he confessed to ignorance of Roman pottery. He conversed with one as if one were worth hearing and even deferred to one's opinion! This was the stuff for the eager undergraduate thirsting for knowledge and unsure of himself. The memory of his figure, capped by a black sombrero of enormous proportions and shrouded in glistening stiff oilskin, tacking unsteadily and unsubstantially up Chambers Street in a raw and foggy winter's night is an unforgettable and appropriate recollection of an Edinburgh professor. To his students also he was the complete professor, omniscient, kind, undemonstratively helpful, and absent-minded. He really did wear socks of different pairs. He did forget to pull down his trouser-legs after a wet excursion in the long grass of the Lammermoors and back in Edinburgh was smartly abducted into the car of a passing friend under the impression that the Professor had committed the ultimate oversight.

The least egoistic of men, he had no idea how important he was to those who were anxious to please him. For an excavation his requirements were of the simplest. He made no pretensions nor exaggerated demands. He was scrupulous in disclaiming credit which he considered due to others and was punctilious in acknowledgments. His personal dislikes remained his own. Disapproval was rarely expressed and then with the minimum of force.

It has been said that perhaps he should have been more outspoken, but reticence has much to commend it in a not over-generous sphere of intellectual

activity. Although he resigned from the Society of Antiquaries of London on a matter of principle and did not return to that body it subsequently awarded him its most illustrious distinction by conferring upon him its Gold Medal in 1956.

Two eminent archæologists, one English, one Scottish, were discussing Childe in the writer's presence shortly after his tragic death. One said, "I have never heard anyone speak ill of Childe" and the other replied, "Well, did you ever hear Childe say a bad word about anyone?" He died with few possessions, but with the profound affection and respect of all who had the privilege of knowing him.

STEWART CRUDEN.