

Obituaries

Cecil Curle

Mrs Cecil L Curle, FSA, FSA Scot, died in Jedburgh after a short illness on 12 April 1987, at the age of 85.

Born in 1901, Cecil Louisa Mowbray was educated at home, and an early interest in art and the history of art led her first to the Glasgow College of Art, then to the Courtauld Institute in London, and finally to the Sorbonne in Paris. There she studied under Henri Focillon, along with Françoise Henry and Geneviève Micheli (later Mrs Marsh-Micheli), who became life-long friends and colleagues in art-historical studies. During her time at the Sorbonne, Cecil Mowbray worked with the Abbé Breuil in the caves at Lascaux; her youth and agility made her specially useful in drawing the almost inaccessible cave-paintings in cramped corners.

Back in Scotland, Cecil Mowbray became involved in Scottish archaeology and the art of Early Christian monuments. She was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1934, and the following year saw her excavating in Shetland on behalf of the Society. This was the spectacularly situated Iron-Age fort at Ness of Burgi, the other side of the bay from Jarlshof, where A O Curle, her future father-in-law, was working. Cecil Mowbray worked with A O Curle both at Jarlshof and Wiltrow in Shetland, and the Ness of Burgi excavation report (1936) records her thanks to him, 'whose experience was invaluable to me'. For two seasons in 1936 and 1937, she worked in Orkney at the Brough of Birsay as supervisor of the excavations organized by J S Richardson on behalf of the Office of Works.

In 1938, Cecil Mowbray married Alexander T Curle, the son of A O Curle and himself a Fellow of this Society since 1933.

During the 1930s, Cecil Mowbray's interest in art-history led her to an intensive study of the incised and sculptured stones of Early Christian Scotland, culminating in a major and influential paper published during the Second World War (1940) when the author was living in Dorset. In 1943 the importance of her work was recognized by her election as a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. After the war, Alexander and Cecil Curle, together with their daughter Christian, spent some years in Ethiopia, where Lieutenant-Colonel Curle was attached to the British Embassy in Addis Ababa, and where Cecil Curle was able to extend her studies of Early Christian art and sculpture to include Ethiopian examples.

A proficient photographer, Cecil Curle's papers were often illustrated with her own excellent photographs, as her 1962 publication of little known monuments in western Scotland demonstrates particularly well.

It was in the 1970s and 1980s that Cecil Curle became again a familiar figure in archaeological circles in Edinburgh and at conferences. With the encouragement of Stewart Cruden and Robert Stevenson, she began the immense task for which Scottish archaeology is deeply indebted: the publication of the artefacts found during excavations on the Brough of Birsay between 1934 and 1974 (1974; 1982; 1983). Her involvement with the excavations had not been such as to make her responsible for the publication of the finds, but she recognized that her experience of the site made

her uniquely suited to a task that might otherwise lie undone for many years more. The publication of her Birsay monograph in her eighty-first year was a magnificent achievement.

The work involved was a source of great enjoyment to her. True to her early training, Cecil Curle paid great attention to detail and sought parallels and dating evidence for the Birsay material amongst comparable artefacts outside Scotland. Particularly important for Birsay are the mould fragments, and she became immersed in their study not just as objects from which fine metalwork was produced but as evidence of complicated technological processes.

Even to the end of her life, Cecil Curle maintained her wide historical and topographical interests, travelling to France and beyond. She was a very generous friend and scholar, but demanding in her standards and conversation with her was never dull.

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