

Obituary

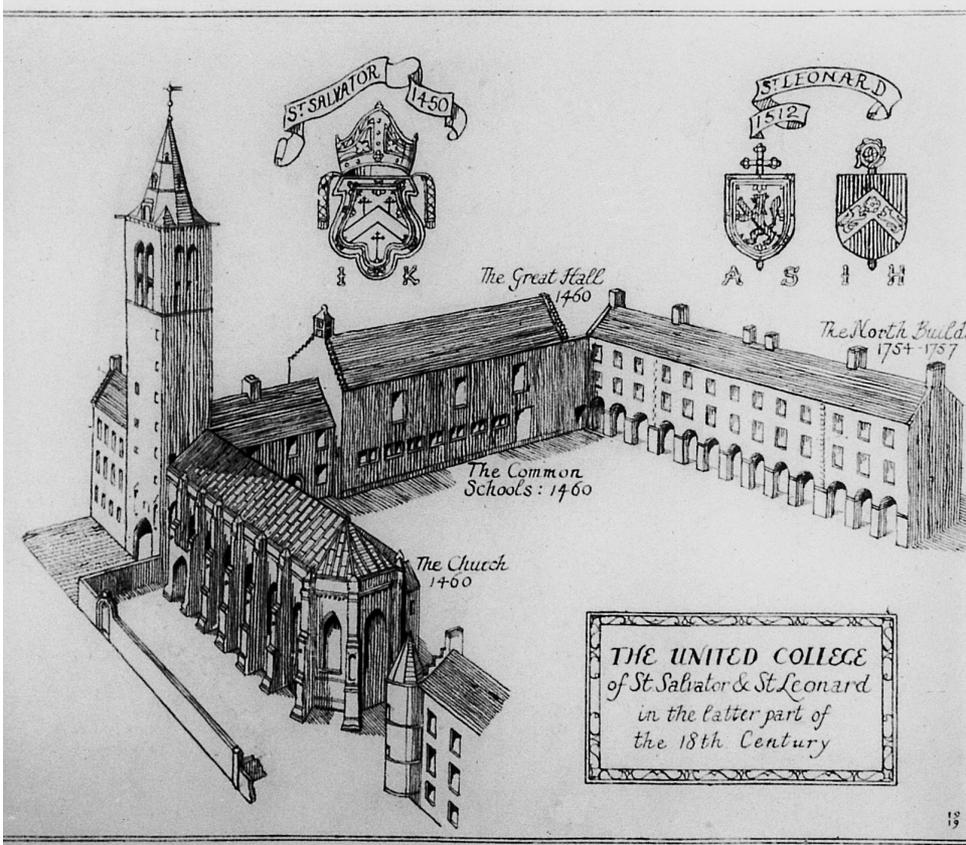
Ronald Gordon Cant

Ronald Gordon Cant was born on 16 December 1908 in Karachi, India (now Pakistan), the son of the Rev. Alan Cant, chaplain of the Church of Scotland in the Indian Ecclesiastical Establishment, and Mary Bryce, from a west of Scotland family. The young Ronald was brought home to Scotland and spent some of his formative years in Aberdeen, then at Edinburgh Academy, although his father was called to the parish of Creich in north Fife on his return from India, and Fife was where the family remained thereafter.

As a son of the manse, Ronald Cant had the soundest basis for the later historian's understanding of his country's turbulent ecclesiastical history. From his enrolment as a young student at St Andrew's University — he matriculated at the age of 16 — the developing scholar, and later teacher, never deviated from the path of historical studies. Above all the ecclesiastical history of his country and its heritage of stone chapels, churches and cathedrals — ever-present reminders of the history of the Christian faith — remained his passions throughout a long life of teaching and conservation involvement.

He graduated from St Andrews in 1928 and pursued further undergraduate study at Oriel College, Oxford. Thereafter, he moved to Edinburgh to research Scottish political thought, as a Carnegie scholar, then back to St Andrews to a lectureship in Medieval History, which he held from 1936 to 1948. After the war he became the first Lecturer in Scottish History, and was able to develop the academic study of his country's history at Scotland's oldest University. During the





Ronald Cant's reconstruction drawing of the 'United College of St Salvator & St Leonard in the latter part of the 18th century' (© Trustees of The Strathmartine Trust)

period when he was the sole teacher of Scottish History at St Andrews, before his retirement as Reader in 1974, he acquired a comprehensive knowledge of the whole history of the nation, and transmitted this to generations of students. All those who were privileged to hear him lecture will remember his ability to impart prodigious amounts of information succinctly and wittily. He taught many of the best Scottish historians, some of whom have themselves professed the teaching of Scottish History in schools and universities throughout the land. As Interim Keeper, Deputy Keeper and Keeper of the University Muniments from 1944 to 1974 he was in a position to become exceedingly erudite about the history of his University. The knowledge acquired was transferred to print in *The College of St Salvator: its foundation and development* (1950), and *The University of Saint Andrews: a short history*, which underwent three editions between 1946 and 1992. In contrast to his expansive spoken style, the prose he wrote was always precise and very much to the point, a model of clarity and balanced information. 'The characteristic fact that his writings have a general as well as a specialist interest is among their chief and most welcome features' is Geoffrey Barrow's appreciative comment in the foreword to *The Scottish Tradition* — the collection of essays written in his honour in 1974.

Scottish antiquarian interests in the widest sense were the hallmark of Ronald Cant's professional life and service, and his intellectual range and diversity of interest were quite

astonishing. The whole of Scottish history and material culture was a framework in which he lived the past, and he had an innate understanding of many and varied aspects of prehistory as well as documented history. He could broach any subject in conversation although usually bringing it round to an issue on which he was well informed. His breadth of approach underscored his understanding and contextualizing of all information from the past, historical and archaeological; his judgement was sound, if sometimes acerbic, whether relating to historical issues or modern politics.

Above all, architecture was Ronald Cant's absorbing interest. In the study and understanding of architecture his historical breadth and close eye for detail were admirably employed. Once more the range of his interest was immensely wide, spanning the simplest of early medieval chapels in Shetland and the splendour of 19th-century mansions. His knowledge and energy were put to good use regarding the townscape and conservation of his own city, St Andrews. In 1937 he was instrumental in founding the St Andrews Preservation Trust, publishing an article in *The Scots Magazine* the following year on 'The future of St Andrews: what preservation means'. As chairman of the Trust (1940–5 and 1955–60) he was deeply involved in a Public Inquiry and the famous 'lang-rigs' legal case over the University's attempted compulsory purchase of the gardens of the South Street town houses — 'the finest street of medieval merchant houses in northern Europe' as he frequently claimed. Often he could be seen in the streets of St Andrews, looking upwards — as so few people do — in contemplation of the finer points of a building's frontage, or communicating his appreciation to a passing friend or colleague.

His wide-ranging knowledge of architects and buildings and his powers of observation made Ronald Cant a most invaluable member of the Historic Buildings Council, on which he served for a very long time, as well as on the Committee on Listed Buildings, and on various Civil Service appointment Boards. He was a Trustee of the National Library of Scotland and of the National Museum of Antiquities, and he sat on the Advisory Committee of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. The period during which he served on the Society's own Council, as Vice-President and then President (1979–81), was the peak of his involvement in helping to guide Scotland's national institutions. His erudition, common sense and sharp humour made contributions to discussion memorable and helped in the solution of many difficult issues.

The range of his knowledge of ecclesiastical architecture was distilled into the subject of his Rhind lecture series in 1979 on the prestigious theme of 'The Medieval Cathedrals of Scotland' (unpublished). He had a gift of adorning his writings on architectural themes with his own very professional plans, maps and charming historical reconstructions, particularly of the medieval colleges of St Andrews. These reconstruction drawings are little known, however, because they were rarely included in his larger publications.

His architectural interests brought him into contact with Ian Lindsay, a major Scottish conservation architect, and the two of them produced architectural studies of 'Old Glasgow' and 'Old Stirling' in the late 1940s, drawing attention to the early buildings in these cities. Through Lindsay, Ronald Cant met and became very friendly with Gerhard Fischer, the distinguished Norwegian architect, archaeologist and re-builder of Trondheim Cathedral. Visits to the Fischers in Norway introduced him to the splendours of the Norwegian landscape, cities, churches and monasteries, and the close historical links which had once existed across the North Sea. This was in the pre-oil era when these ancient links had long withered and lost their vitality (except in times of war). Ronald Cant did much to foster the recreation of these historical links based on close national interests, and these focused naturally enough on the Northern Isles, where the Norwegian heritage was still so strong. The two Conferences commemorating the 500th Anniversary of the pledging of Orkney (Kirkwall 1968) and of Shetland (Lerwick 1969) did much to rekindle

historical awareness of these islands and stimulated Cant's deep and abiding interest in their ecclesiastical architecture. A series of articles ensued, followed by his pioneering book, *The Medieval Churches and Chapels of Shetland* (1975; revised 1995).

Ronald Cant's most generous contribution to the enhancement of Scottish history and culture during his lifetime was his endowment of two society lectureships. Both were established during his Presidency, and it was his close association with the Society and his deep concern for its role in the promotion of Scottish culture which inspired his generosity and vision.

The first lectureship stemmed from the intellectual stimulus which had been generated by the strong collegial bonds established during visits by Ian Lindsay to Norway both pre- and post-war, and by Gerhard Fischer and his wife Tulla to Scotland in 1958. Common interests in the restoration of the foremost medieval ecclesiastical monuments and spiritual power-houses in their own country gave these two conservation architects an instant rapport and long-lasting professional friendship. Ronald Cant himself shared in this Scotto-Norwegian exchange of ideas on conservation architecture, as a friend of Ian Lindsay and latterly of the Fischers. It was as an act of pietas, therefore, that he decided to commemorate Lindsay's work for Scotto-Norwegian relations in the field of architectural history by endowing the 'Lindsay-Fischer Lectureship', to allow alternate visits by a Norwegian scholar to Scotland, and a Scottish scholar to Norway. This was the stimulus to an equally generous response from the Norwegian side and, during a visit to Oslo, representing the Society at the unveiling of a 'portrait relief' of the Fischers in St Hallvard's Churchyard, Ronald Cant was presented with a donation from Oslo municipality to fund the visiting Scottish scholar, who is known in Norway as the 'Fischer-Lindsay Lecturer'. This latter endowment was to be administered by Fortidsminneforeningen ('The Society for Ancient Monuments' — the Norwegian equivalent of the Society of Antiquaries). Ronald Cant had become a member of Fortidsminneforeningen in 1952, being honoured with its distinguished medal on his 90th birthday.

Since the first lecture by Tulla Fischer in 1980 there have been nine visiting scholars from Norway and eight from Scotland in a regular alternate series (although reduced now to every two years); and the endowment has been boosted by some top-up funding from Fortidsminneforeningen and from a private donation. The resulting achievement has been to open up the learned societies of both countries to historians, art historians, archaeologists and conservationists from the neighbour across the North Sea, and to maintain the professional links and create new collegial exchanges such as Ronald himself had benefited from so greatly, and which he wished to perpetuate for succeeding generations.

The second endowment which Ronald Cant made was inspired by the Society's bicentenary celebrations in 1980. As President he was deeply involved in the series of events and exhibitions which commemorated the founding of the Society in 1780 by David Steuart Erskine, 11th Earl of Buchan. Indeed he wrote an appreciation of the earl in *The Scottish Antiquarian Tradition* (1981), a book of essays written to mark the occasion. In addition to the main events commemorating the bicentenary 'it was arranged', as the annual report tells, 'on the initiative of the President', that he would visit regional centres to lecture on the foundation of the Society and to meet local members. Between December 1980 and November 1981 the President travelled to Aberdeen, Dumfries, Glasgow, Hawick, Inveraray, Inverness, Perth, St Andrews and Wick, as well as Toronto. The following year he donated 'a very large and generous gift to the Society' for a Regional Fund to promote lectures, meetings and conferences 'in co-operation with local Societies in parts of Scotland where the Society does not hold meetings'. One of the chief results was the establishment of the series of 'Earl of Buchan Lectures', since delivered in many different parts of Scotland furth of the capital. The President saw the need, and acted towards fulfilling

that need, for the Society to develop links with the wider archaeological and historical world in Scotland, and to bring local Societies within the orbit of its aims and purpose.

Practical, productive and farseeing projects for the deepening and broadening of the Society's activities were not Ronald Cant's only ideals: his philanthropic goals included other Scottish projects of a historical/cultural nature. Many publications, museums, societies, individual events and long-running projects have been helped towards achieving their desired ends by his generosity. Nor will this cease, for shortly before his death he established a trust for the benefit of Scottish history, to be called 'The Strathmartine Trust', after the parish north of Dundee with which his family had long been associated. He never sought any public recognition or thanks for his undisclosed generosity. Indeed it is believed that he refused public honours, although very happy to accept the D.Litt that was awarded to him by the University of Glasgow in 1977, and the Honorary Fellowship bestowed on him by the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland in 1990. His main rewards were in the respect and affection of a loyal band of former students, and in the friendship of colleagues from throughout Scotland's academic community. His name will be mentioned whenever there are two or three of these gathered together, and he will long be remembered in the annals of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland as a most generous benefactor during his active and productive term as President.

*Barbara E Crawford
with acknowledgements to Robert Smart
for additional information*