

Presenting the Scottish Past: the Rhind Lectures for the Session 1999–2000, part 1

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Since their inception in 1876 the Rhind Lectures, established by a bequest to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland by Alexander Henry Rhind of Sibster, have enabled lecturers to explore



ILLUS 1 Alexander Henry Rhind of Sibster, from the *Memoir* written by John Stuart and published by the Society in 1864. The portrait is engraved from a photograph taken in 1860

‘some branch of archaeology, ethnology, ethnography, or allied topic’ in order ‘to assist in the general advancement of knowledge’. Rhind (1833–63) was an exceptional antiquary with wide interests (illus 1). The son of a banker in Wick, he attended lectures at Edinburgh University on Natural History, Natural Philosophy and Scottish History and Antiquities. His intention was to proceed to the Scottish Bar and he attended classes in Law to this end. His health declined, however, and he had to abandon a legal career, and was only able to visit Caithness during the summer months. He had undertaken several excavations in Caithness, and was active in practical aspects of archaeology, such as the depiction of antiquities on Ordnance Survey maps, and on Treasure Trove. Over two winters he excavated in Egypt at Thebes. He died at Zurich in 1863. He had made very specific testamentary provisions, including funds for the training of orphan girls from certain parishes in the county of Caithness. His bequests to the Society included funds for the undertaking of excavations in ‘the north-eastern portion of Scotland’, appropriate volumes for the Library of the Society, to be distinguished by the insertion of a book-plate that signalled the bequest, the lectureship, and the copyright and profits of his volume on Thebes.

For the Rhind Lecture series for 2000 the Programme Committee and Council of the Society suggested a rather different format than before. Figures of historical and archaeological significance might be examined to show how the presentation of the past has evolved over recent centuries. Six lecturers were invited to offer assessments of the contributions of seven historians, antiquaries, or archaeologists. Several of the subjects had themselves delivered Rhind Lectures, Joseph Anderson indeed on several occasions. Originally our intention had been that the papers be gathered together as a separate volume or monograph. Further consideration, however, has suggested that the papers will reach a wider audience if they are published in the *Proceedings*. This also demonstrates our intention to publish contributions of a more discursive nature in future volumes. In Volume 131 the three papers on historical or art historical subjects are published and in Volume 132 three papers of a more archaeological nature will appear.

The papers have been edited to a very limited extent, to allow the spirit of the spoken word to be retained.

It may seem to some that the notion of a lecture series has a 19th-century ring about it. Many of the early published lectures have an air of drama in their delivery that suggests that a theatrical element, however restrained, could captivate an audience. The first published, those by Arthur Mitchell for 1876 and 1878 entitled *The Past in the Present* demonstrated the importance of examining contemporary artefacts in the study of past technologies. The next four lectures, by Joseph Anderson between 1879 and 1882, set archaeological studies on course for the next 50 years. Of the present subjects of enquiry Baldwin Brown delivered his lectures in 1910. In the next group of papers apart from Joseph Anderson, James Curle lectured in 1908 and A O Curle in 1918. A O Curle is one of the few lecturers to give an impression of the occasion. In his *Journal* he writes, ‘To my no small surprise on the opening day there were more people than there were seats for in the Royal Arch Hall [in Queen Street, Edinburgh], and on the last day there was almost as large a crowd. There must have been from 150 to 200 people each day and it was particularly gratifying to see the same people there day after day.’ Memorable lecture series of more recent times include Stuart Piggott’s *The Prehistoric Origins of Europe* in 1962, Richard Bradley’s *Altering the Earth* in 1992, John and Bryony Coles on the contribution of wetland archaeology, *Enlarging the Past*, in 1995, and Colin Renfrew in 2001 on *Modern Art and Archaeology*.

The success of the 1999–2000 series was demonstrated by sustained interest from the Fellowship and by suggestions for potential candidates for a future series along the same lines.