

OBITUARY NOTICE

JOHN FAITHFULL FLEET, C.I.E.

ON the 21st of February last John Faithfull Fleet passed away from us, dear to many, and honoured by all. Our loss is great, greater than words can tell.

He came from a typical English stock of the best type. His father was John George Fleet, of Roystons, Chiswick, his mother Esther Faithfull. Born in 1847 and educated at the Merchant Taylors' School, he was appointed in 1865 to the Indian Civil Service, and in preparation for his work in India applied himself among various studies to Sanskrit, which he learned from Theodor Goldstücker, then professor at University College, London. To Goldstücker's profound learning and stimulating teaching he owed much. When his studies in London were finished he proceeded in 1867 to the Presidency of Bombay, and entered the Revenue and Executive Branch of the service. He soon distinguished himself as a capable and energetic administrator, and was successively Assistant Collector and Magistrate, Educational Inspector in the Southern Division (1872), Assistant Political Agent in Kolhapur and the Southern Maratha Country (1875), and Collector and Magistrate (1882). In the meanwhile he was busy with literary and scientific studies. From the first he had been attracted to the investigation of the historical records engraved on stone and copper-plates which are so abundant in the Bombay Presidency. Before his time little progress had been made in constructing scientific systems of Indian history and epigraphy: the work that had been done was largely one-sided and amateurish, and from lack of fixed criteria of date almost the whole of the chronology was floating in

the air. That science arose out of this chaos was due to Fleet more than to any other man. The subject was congenial to his mind, which cared intensely for realities and little for the artificial elegances of literature, except in so far as the knowledge of the latter enabled him to interpret the records of the former. He loved details, not for their own sake, but as bricks to be methodically built up into ordered systems of science. And the combination of qualities that he brought to bear upon these studies was such as no previous investigator had ever possessed. He perfected his Sanskrit; he acquired a thorough mastery over the beautiful Kanarese language in its ancient and modern dialects; and he gradually gained a knowledge of Indian chronology and astronomy in which few, if any, Europeans could equal him. The royal roads to learning which students of this generation enjoy were not granted to him; good grammars, handbooks, and dictionaries were few; and Fleet acquired his learning by hard labour under great difficulties. To give only one instance, he worked for several years without a lexicon of Sanskrit, his only book of reference being Haughton's Bengali-English Dictionary. But in spite of the obstacles put in his way by lack of facilities and of leisure—or perhaps indeed because of them, for difficulties only increase the strength of mind of such characters—he soon made his mark by his papers on the epigraphic records and history of Southern India, first in the *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, and then in the *Indian Antiquary*, which was founded in 1872, and was edited by him from the fourteenth to the twentieth year of its career. His writings were notable for the combination of the qualities most essential for the epigraphist-historian—deep knowledge of the Sanskrit and Kanarese languages and literatures, minute accuracy in details, together with remarkable skill in synthesis, sound critical judgment, and strictly scientific method.

In 1878 he published for the India Office the collection entitled "Pāli, Sanskrit, and Old-Canarese Inscriptions". In 1883 the post of Epigraphist to the Government of India was specially created, and he was appointed to it. He held it for three years. In 1886 he came back to administrative duty, becoming Collector and Magistrate at Sholapur. Two years later appeared his "Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors", forming the third volume of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, a splendid monument of exact scholarship and critical judgment. The Gupta period is in the annals of classical India almost what the Periclean age is in the history of Greece; and in this magnificent volume Fleet did full justice to its epigraphic records from the side both of literature and of history. He published here the brilliant discovery that the epoch of the Gupta dynasty was A.D. 319–20, which ever since has been the keystone in the structure of Indian chronology. And all the time he was working with unflagging energy on his official duties. In 1889 he became Senior Collector, in 1891 Commissioner of the Southern and in 1892 of the Central Divisions, and in 1893 Commissioner of Customs. His "Dynasties of the Kanarese Districts in the Bombay Presidency", forming vol. i, pt. ii, of the *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*, was issued in 1895. In this work he digested with masterly system the immense mass of historical data that he had collected during his many years of research in the epigraphic and literary records of his much-loved province and its neighbourhood, and established the outlines of its history on a sure basis. Two years later he retired from the Indian Civil Service, and made his home in Ealing. He was now able to give his whole time and energy to his favourite studies, and he worked upon them constantly and vigorously almost to the last, contributing to this Journal and the *Epigraphia Indica* a continuous series

of papers and notes, all of which bore the impress of his deep and exact learning. In 1906 he became Honorary Secretary of this Society, an office which he held to the end of his life, and in 1912 he was awarded the Society's Gold Medal.

Fleet's position is that of a *maestro di color che sanno*, a leader of scientific research. His method was one of exact, sober, and critical investigation of facts, aiming at sure synthesis, and avoiding unsure speculation. He was certainly a philologist, and that to an eminent degree: he had an accurate and wide knowledge of Sanskrit, and his mastery of Kanarese was extraordinary; but he chiefly valued these things as means for the attainment of scientific and historical truth. For literature as literature, art for art's sake, he did not greatly care. But he had a warm humanity and keen interest in the real things of life, which led him to delight in the simple ballads of his sturdy peasantry, many of which he collected with loving care, and some of which he published in the *Indian Antiquary* with their music. Allied to this quality was his capacity for friendship. He was a singularly warm and generous friend, endlessly kind and thoughtful, and freely lavishing time and labour in order to aid others. There was no trace of selfishness or egoism in his nature. He invited newcomers into the domain in which he was acknowledged master, and generously helped them with counsel and guidance. He persuaded Franz Kielhorn, the great master of Sanskrit grammar, to turn his attention to epigraphy and chronology; and others are still living who can testify to their indebtedness to him for inspiration and help. *Non omnis mortuus est*: to all he has bequeathed a noble example of high achievement, and to his friends a dear and gracious memory.

L. D. BARNETT.
