

Walter Biggar Blaikie, LL.D., D.L.

WALTER BIGGAR BLAIKIE was born in 1847 at Pilrig, and lived for eighty years a life of restless and varied activity in both body and mind. The son of a minister who had come out at the Disruption, he was born and bred in the Free Church. Educated at the Edinburgh Academy and the University, he began life as a civil engineer with Blyth & Blyth, the ancestors of the present firm. Railway engineering was the coming thing, and Blaikie worked for some time on developments of the Caledonian Railway, laying out, amongst others, the line to Colinton and Balerno, with instructions to disturb as little as possible on the way. His next move was to enter the Indian Public Works Department in 1873, and he spent seven full and energetic years in constructing roads and a variety of buildings of oddly assorted character. Though a small part of his life and little connected with his subsequent work and interests, the time spent in India made a deep impression on him, and he remained in thought an Anglo-Indian to the last. Possibly the wandering life, varied occupation, and continuous demand on ingenuity and resource, exactly suited his temperament, while his intellectual endowments gave him ready introduction to many older men of high position and wider experience. But the climate was risky for his wife and child, so the family returned to Edinburgh. A chance meeting with Thomas Constable, the printer, who required help in his works, led to Blaikie entering the firm, in which he soon became junior partner and finally the chief.

An engineer and mechanic he had little difficulty with the mechanism of printing, and the firm never attempted mass production and elaborate labour-saving devices. As a book-lover his interests lay more in the quality than the quantity of output, and dignified taste was perhaps the keynote. He described himself as "printer" to the last, as one may describe artists in other lines as sculptor, painter, or engraver; and in his hands, aided by his friend Mr Bruce of Currie, the paper-maker, Edinburgh book-production became the exemplar of workmanship, while his literary sense never allowed the form to be more than a fit presentment of the matter.

Printing was Blaikie's exclusive business, but his hobbies and interests ranged far and wide. Astronomer, historian, archæologist, inventor,

literary enthusiast, he was likewise devoted to city improvement, hospital organisation, and the good of his fellow-men generally. His activity was boundless, and it scarcely lessened until the very last years of his life, when outraged nature rebelled at the ruthless demands the spirit made on the worn-out body. Any adequate account of his work would fill a book, and it must suffice here to give a mere list of the subjects in which he had expert knowledge. Chief among these was his exhaustive inquiry into the period of the '45, with the history of Prince Charlie and all the people involved in that stirring time, and his writings are perhaps the final word on the subject. The origin and early history of the Scottish Presbyterian Church also attracted him, and his close examination of records shed some novel lights on questions often misinterpreted. The story of King Arthur drew him to another research, and the Roman occupation of Scotland to yet another. In astronomy his star maps are well known, and he spent much time and ingenuity on what he christened a Cosmosphere—two concentric spheres, of which the inner represented the earth and the outer the sky, capable of suitable rotation. This was simplified to a flat projection on celluloid, and provided a convenient calculator whereby the positions of stars could be readily determined, thus saving a great amount of laborious computation. Sundials always fascinated him, and he devised a new pattern. He had also made a study of the calendar from very early times, and constructed his own formula for finding any specified day at any remote time. His inventive mind applied itself to devices for hospital work and for surveying with equal readiness.

But Blaikie was a combination of the student and the man of affairs. He would spend days on end in his library, walled in with books, each one of which was an intimate with no hidden secrets, and the friends of his heart were poets, novelists, historians, and scholars. Nevertheless, he for many years took an active part in the organisation of the printing trade, a no less active part in the management of the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, where he introduced important changes, and he was a warm supporter of the Town-planning schemes of Professor Patrick Geddes, finally concentrating his personal efforts on the formation of slum gardens about the Grassmarket and Cowgate.

As an old volunteer, Blaikie threw himself into war work with ardour, speaking at recruiting meetings and organising the Recruiting Committee of the Territorial Association. He collected socks for the Scottish regiments and sent out tens of thousands. His early association in India with military life had never been dropped, so he was able to link up his

civilian influence and experience of affairs with his personal knowledge of those in high military command.

While he settled down to printing at the age of thirty-four and remained at it for over forty years, those years brought sudden changes. Heavy losses through a defaulting partner compelled him to give up his large house and lavish hospitality, and to retire to small lodgings in Colinton, where he lived for some years with severe economy, at a time of life when a man who has worked hard looks to freedom from money limitations. So far as the writer of these notes can vouch, his only expressed regrets during those years were that he could no longer entertain his friends, support deserving activities with his purse, or have his books about him. But times improved with him, and his last years gave him back his library and means for generosity, and he was well content.

A man of unusually quick intellect and restless mind, he did not suffer fools gladly; and in consequence his friendships, while extending over a very wide range of social status and character of occupation, were distinctly eclectic. A bonny fighter for what he held as true or right, he could give with the best, nor did personal regard prevent him from speaking his mind; but he could take a counter attack with equal freedom, and his friends only loved him the more for his directness. He was as near to perfect intellectual honesty as a man may attain to, and that is no small thing for an ingenious brain and a ready wit.

Blaikie's connection with the Royal Society of Edinburgh dates from 1897; and though a Fellow for thirty years he only once addressed the Society, the subject being an account of a curious document showing forth a National Petition from the leading men in Scotland in 1637 against church innovations introduced by Laud. He had bought the document to save it from being sold abroad, trusting that the nation would take it off his hands, and it is satisfactory to relate that this was done. His name appears once more as the author of the biographical notice of his friend Dr Sutherland Black. He served on the Council from 1914 to 1917, and was a vice-president from 1924 to 1927. For many years he attended the dinners of the Royal Society Club, and had a fund of recollections of old members.

His mind was not greatly attracted to pure science. Probably he lacked the requisite continuity of interest, and where he approached the subject in any branch it was more from its human and even utilitarian aspect. While interested in the heavenly bodies as visible denizens of the sky, he cared little for those he could not see nor for the constitution

of any of them. Mathematics were merely a means to a concrete end, while biological subjects began and ended with hospital practice. Yet he counted among his friends many scientific men in various lines, who doubtless found his acute mind stimulating and refreshing. It was characteristic that a competent knowledge of a subject outside of his own range, however commonplace, would rouse in him not merely a full recognition but even an unmerited admiration, considering his own stores of knowledge.

In the year 1913 the University of Edinburgh bestowed on him the degree of LL.D., and in 1918 he was appointed Deputy Lieutenant in the County of Midlothian.

Throughout his long life he enjoyed exceptional health, and his acquaintance with the medical profession was quite platonic. He was curiously eager to achieve his eighty years, and was visibly pleased on his eightieth birthday. At last his body failed, and he watched it weakening with a quiet mind and a clear head, his one regret being the leaving of work he would like to have done.

F. G. B.