

The Rt. Hon. Lord Abercromby, LL.D. By Mr A. O. Curle,
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(Read December 8, 1924.)

JOHN, LORD ABERCROMBY, Fifth Baron Abercromby of Aboukir and Tullibody, died at his residence in Edinburgh on 7th October last. He was the second son of the third holder of the title, and succeeded to a brother in 1917. His great-grandfather was the celebrated Sir Ralph Abercromby, the hero of Aboukir, who died of his wounds after the battle in 1801, and it was to do him posthumous honour that the title was created in favour of his widow, with remainder to his heirs male.

Lord Abercromby came of a family of soldiers and lawyers, a number of whom gained distinction in the service of their country. One grand-uncle, an ex-speaker of the House of Commons, was raised to the peerage as Lord Dunfermline; another was commander-in-chief in India, and for thirty years governor of the Castle of Edinburgh; while his grandfather, Sir Ralph's eldest son, was a member of the Scottish Bar. From such a stock may it not have been that he inherited a spirit of adventure, which found vent in oft-repeated travel, and a sense of orderliness which produced in him a scientific antiquary of repute?

Born in 1841, and so delicate that he was not expected to live (as he tells us in a brief MS. autobiography he has left), he yet so developed to manhood as to survive after an active life to his eighty-fourth year.

Like others of his family, he chose the army as a profession, and on leaving Harrow, where he was at school, received a commission in the Rifle Brigade. The removal of his battalion to Malta soon gave him an opportunity of indulging his inborn tastes, and, while still in his teens, he was learning Italian and interesting himself in the Maltese language. A walking tour through Italy, in those days somewhat of an adventure, took him to Rome and Florence, and it was characteristic of him that he should interest himself in Roman architecture and Etruscan inscriptions, and that he should visit every Etruscan town that lay on his route. Wherever his military duties took him he made good his opportunities of studying languages, and of visiting places of historic interest within his reach. In 1864, with the transference of his battalion to Gibraltar, his archæological enthusiasm received a fresh impulse from his contact with Dr Bush and several other distinguished archæologists, who came to explore caves in the rock,

and from them he learned his first lesson in craniology and prehistoric archæology. Though he had passed the Staff College, seeing no prospects of active service or promotion in the army, in 1870 he sent in his papers.

Then followed years of travel, never idle years, for his mind was too active for that. He was in Germany during the Franco-Prussian War, entered Metz immediately after its fall, saw evidence of the horrors of the siege, and for two days, he tells us, the bill of fare at his hotel consisted of horseflesh and French beans. For a couple of years at Dresden he studied German and art, but the latter study he soon relinquished, convinced that he had taken it up too late in life. Then he visited Greece, and on one of his expeditions was nearly lost on Mount Ida through missing his guide and finding himself as daylight failed at the edge of a precipice. Fortunately for him, shepherds whom he encountered were hospitably disposed, and gave him shelter for the night.

Year in, year out he wandered abroad, always on some philological or archæological quest.

In 1878 he joined the Folklore Society, adding yet another to the subjects in which he took an active interest, and this induced him to study old Irish, and afterwards modern Erse. Being urged to learn a new type of language, he set himself to master Finnish, and this acquisition ultimately resulted in the publication of the *Pre- and Proto-historic Finns* in 1898, a work at which he had persistently laboured for fifteen years. Before the issue of that book, however, he had published, in 1899, *A Trip through the Eastern Caucasus*, an account of a tour which he had undertaken in that region in the previous year with a philological purpose in his mind, as he had become interested in the various languages of the Caucasus. Swedish and Russian were other tongues he studied, and he had even taken lessons in Lapp.

In 1892 he removed his home from London to Edinburgh, and began at once to take an active part in the affairs of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and an interest in British archæology generally. To the funds of that Society he from time to time contributed generously for the purpose of assisting excavations. He read numerous papers, was for some years one of the secretaries, several times a member of council, and served periods in office as a vice-president and president. His chief archæological study was that of the comparative chronology of the sepulchral pottery of the Bronze Age, and in fulfilment of the task which he had set himself, of elucidating this problem, he travelled far and near in this country and on the Continent, gleaning information and obtaining photographs.

Ultimately he produced in 1912 his great work, *A Study of the Bronze Age Pottery of Great Britain and Ireland*, in two volumes. This was a pioneer work, and consequently later researches may have displaced some of the author's conclusions, but from the wealth of information and the fullness of illustration the volumes must for long remain necessary adjuncts to any good archæological library.

Of the Royal Society of Edinburgh he was elected a Fellow in 1898, but to its *Proceedings* he only once contributed, when, associated in a paper with Dr Robert Munro, he described an urn found in a stone cist near Largs.

Philologist, Folklorist, and Antiquary, Lord Abercromby was at the same time a man of marked social charm, and round his hospitable table he loved to gather a circle of congenial guests, not infrequently to extend a welcome to some eminent scientist or scholar whose business brought him to Edinburgh. By a large circle of friends he will long be held in kindly remembrance. He is survived by an only daughter, Madame Nasos, but with his death the title becomes extinct.