

## AN HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE SCOTTISH HISTORY SOCIETY

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(from the Society's volume for 1967)

When the Scottish History Society celebrated in 1936 the fiftieth anniversary of its foundation, Dr W. K. Dickson, then Chair-man of Council wrote a survey of its first fifty years, which was issued as a pamphlet and later bound up with *The Court Book of the Barony of Carnwath* (Third Series, volume xxix). His work was comprehensive and perceptive, and it would be foolish to re-tread the ground which he covered so well. It is enough to recall here that the Society was founded in 1886, at the instigation of Archibald, fifth Earl of Rosebery, who remained its President until his death in 1929. From its foundation, the Society was fortunate in having as its editors, councillors and office-bearers a body of remarkable men. The first three Honorary Secretaries, for example, who spanned a period of thirty-four years from 1886 to 1920, were Thomas Graves Law, Librarian of the Signet Library, David Hay Fleming, historian of the Scottish Reformation, and John Maitland Thomson, Curator of Historical Records at the Register House.

Those were the brave days, when two volumes a year came with great regularity from the presses, each costing a mere £150-200. Membership of the Society was limited to 400, and one local historian at least proudly described himself on his title-page as 'Member of the Scottish History Society'. Lord Rosebery remarked in 1905: 'Wherever I go in Scotland, and wherever I find a bookish or historical personage, and I ask them are they members of the Scottish History Society, they are apt to reply with a groan: "No; for us there is no hope; we were not original members, and we think it takes a lifetime to get into the Society"'.

The war of 1914-18 seriously affected the Society's activities. Publication continued, but money was short and post-war recovery was slow. In 1920, the limitation on membership was removed and an appeal for support issued in 1922 produced about ninety new members. Membership reached its highest point in 1927, when it stood at a figure of 655, including 125 libraries.

A high membership figure has always been the basis of the Society's prosperity. It is tempting to speculate about what may produce an increase in the roll – favourable economic conditions, increasing national sentiment, effective publicity or a broadly-based publications policy? Perhaps all play a part. Certainly the 1930s saw a fall in membership. When Dr Dickson wrote in 1936, the total was 544 members, including 132 libraries. In the thirty years since then the figures of membership have first declined and then risen, in an almost perfect curve. Numbers dropped throughout the war of 1939-45 and until as late as 1952, when the total stood perilously low at 375, and the Council warned that further losses would make it impossible to publish one volume each year. But from that point recovery began and in 1967 the membership stands at 559, including 199 libraries, and is therefore back to the level of 1936. There has been a net increase of 15 members in the five years 1962-67.

A decreasing membership meant a falling income and some of the Society's efforts had to be curtailed. From 1939 onwards it was impossible to issue more than one volume per year. War service drew away a generation of potential young editors.

Delays in publication are always liable to occur in a society which depends on the voluntary editorial work of busy men, but in wartime the delays became seriously troublesome. Volumes became slimmer, illustrations became rare and frequent *Miscellany* volumes were used as stop-gaps. Continued rises in the cost of printing added a further problem. By the late 1940s, each volume was costing about £350. (Now, in the late 1960s, each costs over £1,000.) Fortunately, the financial outlook was not entirely bleak, since the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland began in 1948 to give the Society annual grants in aid of publication, which have continued since then and have been warmly appreciated by the Council. In the difficult times of the early 1950s, this support may indeed have saved the Society from extinction.

In spite of all problems, the standard of editing to be found in the Society's publications since 1936 has remained commendably high. Perhaps the subject-matter of the volumes has been less adventurous than it was in the pioneering First Series. But this can be ascribed, in part at least, to the stand-still in historical studies brought about by the war of 1939-45 and its aftermath. The spread of published material over the centuries has changed a little, as compared with the publications of our first fifty years. Lord Rosebery was somewhat averse from volumes of medieval charters, on which he remarked in 1906: 'I view the publication of charters as rather a crutch than a prominent object of our being'. Down to 1936 the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries took much the largest share of print. Since that date, roughly one quarter of the volumes have come from the medieval period and the remainder have been fairly evenly spread over the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The nineteenth century has remained almost entirely neglected.

All the standard subjects of Scottish history have received some attention in the volumes issued since 1936. Political history has not been especially evident, but *The Letters of James IV, 1505-13* (1953), calendared by R. K. Hannay and edited by R. L. Mackie, and *An Account of the Proceedings of the Estates in Scotland, 1689-90* (1954-55), edited by Dr E. W. M. Balfour-Melville, both provide first-rate political material. Constitutional studies have been few but important. Following his remarkable volume on *The Sheriff Court Book of Fife, 1515-22* (1928), Professor W. Croft Dickinson produced *The Barony Court Book of Carnwath, 1523-42* (1937) and *Early Records of Aberdeen, 1317, 1398-1407* (1957). To each of these three works he prefaced an introduction of vital importance for studies in the law and constitution of Scotland. Following these precedents, Professor George S. Pryde provided in the introduction to his *Court Book of the Burgh of Kirkintilloch, 1658-94* (1963) a thorough study of the long history of the Scottish burgh of barony.

Ecclesiastical history, for so long the staple of historical studies in Scotland, has remained to the fore in the Society's list of publications. Two volumes of *Minutes of the Synod of Argyll, 1639-61*, edited by Duncan C. Mactavish, published in 1943 and 1944, helped to keep the publications programme moving forward during the war. In *Accounts of the Collectors of the Thirds of Benefices, 1561-72*, published in 1949, Dr (now Professor) Gordon Donaldson edited in admirably concise form a primary record source for the administration of the church in Scotland immediately after the Reformation. From a different era and origin arose the material in Mrs Annie Dunlop's second volume of her *Calendar of Scottish Supplications to Rome* (1956), covering the period 1423 to 1428. Also of ecclesiastical interest have been the editions of two collections of medieval charters: *Inchcolm Charters*, edited by the

Rev. D. E. Easson and Dr Angus Macdonald in 1938, and Dr Easson's *Charters of the Abbey of Coupar Angus* (2 volumes, 1947). The latter work put into print, with a wealth of editorial notes, the largest remaining group of unpublished monastic charters in Scotland.

Jacobite material has been much less prominent in the last thirty years of the Society's activities than during its first fifty, and is represented by only one volume, Miss Henrietta Tayler's *Jacobite Court at Rome, 1719* (1938), plus a few *Miscellany* items. Social history, which was particularly well represented in the First Series, has also been less in evidence, but Miss Barbara L. H. Horn's *Letters of John Ramsay of Ochtertyre, 1799-1812* (1966) marks a return to this popular and valuable field of study.

Neglect of social material may be surprising and culpable, but to counterbalance this there has been a reasonably strong interest in economic history, in continuation of the Society's early policies, which led to the production of pioneer works such as *The Minute Book of the Managers of the New Mills Cloth Manufactory, 1681-90*, edited by W. R. Scott in 1905. Before the war there appeared Miss Margaret M. McArthur's *Survey of Lochtayside, 1769* (1936), and during it there followed Professor Henry Hamilton's important edition of estate records, *Monymusk Papers* (1945). Mr J. G. Kyd's *Scottish Population Statistics* (1952) made available, under an unfortunately general title, Dr Alexander Webster's pioneering analysis of the population of Scotland in 1755. Estate material from Highland areas has appeared in John Home's *Survey of Assynt* (1960), edited by R. J. Adam, and *Argyll Estate Instructions (Mull, Morvern, Tiree), 1771-1805* (1964), edited by Eric R. Cregeen. Publications now in preparation will consolidate the list in the field of economic history and will strengthen it in the subject of social history.

The names of the Society's office-bearers since 1936 will evoke thoughts and memories for anyone who has been aware of the personalities of the world of Scottish historical studies during the last two generations. It is remarkable that of the ten Presidents of the Society since 1936 only four have been professional historians. The names of Thomas Johnston, Lord Clyde and Lord Cooper, Dr H. W. Meikle and Dr W. Douglas Simpson reveal that the worlds of politics, law and librarianship have lent eminent men to serve in the Society's highest post. Of the many fine presidential addresses that the Society has heard, the most widely known, and perhaps the most seminal, have been the four which were delivered in 1946-49 by Lord Cooper and published by him under the title *Supra Crepidam* (1951).

In the list of Chairmen of Council, professional historians have naturally been more prominent. So many of the holders of the chairs of Scottish History at Edinburgh and Glasgow have held the office of Chairman that it almost appears to be an additional responsibility which comes to each, willy-nilly, along with his chair. Many members of the Council itself have served ably for long periods and the Society owes a special debt to the band of older members who acted as councillors during the war of 1939-45 and assisted the office-bearers to keep the Society in being. Dr H. W. Meikle and Professor J. D. Mackie successively held the office of Chairman of Council during the difficult days of the 1940s and it was a fitting expression of the Society's gratitude to them that both should later have been honoured by election to the Presidency. Under a self-denying ordinance pro-posed by the late Professor George Pryde, since 1960 members of Council have not been automatically re-elected after each four-year term

of office, and the gradual change in the composition of the Council in recent years has led to a wider representation of interests.

Throughout its history the Society has been fortunate in that many of its executive officers, the Honorary Secretary and Honorary Treasurer, have served for long periods. From 1886 to 1965 there were only six Honorary Treasurers, and the average length of tenure of that office was thirteen years. From 1886 to 1962 only eight men served as Honorary Secretary, and of these Dr T. G. Law, the first Secretary, held office for eighteen years and Dr E. W. M. Balfour-Melville for thirty-one years, from 1931 to 1962. Indeed the last thirty years of the Society's existence can most properly be described as 'the Balfour-Melville era'. He is the only man to have served successively as Honorary Secretary, Chairman of Council and President and was for more than a generation the very embodiment of the Society. The work of administration, editorial supervision and liaison with printers always lies in the background of the Society's affairs. All this he carried through with care, patience and determination. Professor D. B. Horn's memoir of Dr Balfour-Melville, published in *Miscellany*, volume x (1966), revealed with clarity, and to the surprise of many, that the Scottish History Society was only one of numerous bodies to which this remarkable man devoted a lifetime of voluntary service.

The recent history of the Society is too close to permit a balanced assessment. But a few important facts deserve to be recorded. Membership continues to increase each year and this helps to combat rising printing costs. The annual subscription stood at one guinea from 1886 until 1961. In that year a modest increase, to £1 5s, was introduced, but this proved inadequate and in 1965 the subscription was fixed at £2 2s. At this level income from subscriptions alone is still not sufficient to keep the Society solvent, but other sources of revenue, such as grants from the Carnegie Trust, the generous contributions of Mrs Annie I. Dunlop, and profits from sales of back volumes, all combine to enable the Society to meet its commitments, at least for the present. New sources of revenue should appear when, under an agreement reached in 1966 with the Kraus Reprint Corporation, all the volumes of the First, Second and Third Series are reprinted. Sales of these reprints are expected to produce both royalties for the Society and an increase in library membership in the United States of America. But these developments lie in the future.

Visually at least, the most important recent change in the Society's activities has been the inauguration, in 1964, of the new Fourth Series, in a redesigned format. While even those who planned the change had feelings of regret at the demise of the well-known green cloth series, the brighter binding and the cleaner lines of the new typeface have been widely welcomed. A look forward to the volumes now in preparation for the Fourth Series suggests that it will belong to a new generation of editors, who will give more attention to social and economic history and will rescue the nineteenth century from neglect. But it is also fitting to look back to the conclusion of the Third Series and to salute the older generation who carried the torch for so long. From the end of the war to 1964, the only younger scholars to appear as editors of volumes were Dr Gordon Donaldson and Mr R. J. Adam. The stalwarts of pre-war days - Dr Easson, Mrs Dunlop, Professor Croft Dickinson and Professor Pryde - remained active long after the war and to them the Society owes much.

Several recent events suggest that the Society is now taking a wider interest in historical matters beyond its principal sphere, which must be publication. This marks

a return to the ideas of the 1920s when the Society was active in drawing attention to official neglect of the national records. During the last thirty years, the Society has tended to decline any involvement in protests or celebrations, whether political or sentimental. But there are fields in which its voice is now being heard in public. The Council has given evidence in recent years to three government committees examining aspects of record policy. In November 1966, the Council took an initiative in sponsoring a technical conference for the editors of Scottish historical societies. This stimulating and successful occasion enabled more than sixty individuals, including representatives of twenty-two societies, to gather up-to-date information about techniques of printing and publishing. The Council has also recently agreed to nominate a representative to the British National Committee of the International Congress of Historical Sciences and hopes in this way to press the claims of Scottish history upon a wider world.

To sum up the activities of the Society during the last thirty years is no easy task. But perhaps two achievements are the principal ones. First, the Society has survived. A negative virtue, perhaps; but many factors have been against us - the economic troubles of the 1930s, the war and its after-effects, the rise in printing costs. The loyalty of members and the hard work of the executive have brought the Society once more to a flourishing state. Secondly, the Society has printed since 1936 over 7,000 pages of record material. It has thus provided a channel for publishing historical evidence of a kind which few commercial publishers could afford to issue, even if they wished to do so. The writing of Scottish history is all the more soundly based as a result of the Society's efforts.

Perhaps, at the same time, the last thirty years have sometimes tended to neglect that 'element of readability' in the publications which appealed so strongly to Lord Rosebery. He held firmly that 'the object of our Society [is]....to supply readable records of a past era in Scotland, and more especially those bearing on the social and domestic life of the people which otherwise would not be readily available'. Perhaps these words may be at least one of the keynotes for the next twenty years. Lord Rosebery would no doubt have felt that we had published too many formal records in the last thirty years. But if he was irritated by the sight of medieval charters, he would surely also have been pleased to find the prophecy fulfilled which he uttered when he proposed the foundation of the Society in 1886: 'We should have a society in Scotland for printing the manuscript materials for Scottish history, especially social history....It would pre-serve the perishable; it would form a collection valuable to the literature of the whole world, but profoundly attractive to Scotsmen; and it would raise a national monument, even more consistent and durable than those spectral and embarrassed columns which perplex the tourist on the Calton Hill'.