

Transactions

OF THE

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THURSDAY, MAY 17, 1883.

MEETING AT BANFF.

ON Thursday, at the meeting of this Club, Mr Ramsay presiding, the Secretary reported that most of the societies to which application had been made by circular in regard to the August meeting, had replied in favourable terms. More than a sufficient number of papers had been offered for the occasion, by gentlemen in various parts of the country, and the Council had made a selection. At least six papers will be read by distinguished members of other societies, and two or three by members of the Banff club. A committee has been appointed to carry out the arrangements for the reception of the strangers.

Sheriff Scott Moncrieff read a very interesting paper on Dr Arthur Mitchell's 'Past in the Present,' as follows:—

By way of apology for this paper, or rather for the absence of originality in it, I may state that only the other day I found our much esteemed secretary unprovided with materials for this evening's programme, and it was in answer to his appeal that I undertook to appear before you.

These illustrations of the 'Past in the Present' are not mine, but those of Dr Arthur Mitchell, a gentleman not unknown in these parts, and one of the most thoughtful and cultivated of our Scottish antiquaries. He has, in the lecture to which I am about to refer, at once administered a rebuke and given a wise caution. He rebukes the class who put a senseless value upon mere antiquity, and he bestows a wise warning against the drawing of hasty conclusions respecting the age or obsolete character either of an article or of a custom. His object is to prove that what is generally supposed to be exclusively characteristic of a past age may still linger in the present—that barbarism, or what is reckoned such in art or in belief, may actually go hand in hand with advanced civilization. 'It will be plain,' he says to his readers, 'that, in showing how often the past is seen in the present, how many neolithic objects and customs exist among us, I have sought and found opportunities of showing that the methods followed on

archæological inquiries should be as strict as those which are deemed necessary in other departments of science.

As Dr Mitchell's book may not be known to many members, I have here noted several of the illustrations which he has offered of what he maintains to be the fact, and possibly some here to-night may be able to instance others which have come under their own experience.

In 1864, Dr Mitchell visited Fettar, one of the Shetland group. Upon the road he overtook a boy engaged in whittling a soft species of stone, and he asked his object in doing this. The answer was that he was making a *whorl* for his mother. A whorl, it may be necessary to explain, is a perforated disc of stone placed upon a spindle in order to act as a fly-wheel. These whorls appear in almost every museum of old things. They are found in trochs and graves—amongst the relics of Swiss lake dwellers, and even the ruins of Troy. And yet in the home of this Fettar boy Dr Mitchell found three still in use, just as they had been used thousands of years ago. Complicated machinery has well-nigh driven household spinning out of fashion, but this woman of the nineteenth century was adhering to the simple whorl, which elsewhere was being treasured as the rare relic of a hoary antiquity. In another part of the country, within easy distance by rail of Banff, he found a woman who made use of a potato for this purpose, and who, on being shown a stone whorl, said she had never seen such a thing upon a spindle. A potato had served her purpose, and she never seems to have thought of finding a more durable substitute.

Another fact which these discoveries illustrate is this. It by no means follows that the ruder instruments are always the more ancient—that, for example, a rudely carved stone or ill-shaped urn is of greater antiquity than one which is highly finished. Poverty of design or clumsy execution may not necessarily indicate an early, and therefore an ancient type, but rather the decline of an art which has been rendered useless by more recent discoveries, and has thus continued to be practised only by the poorest class in the most remote districts. The stone whorl, when in general use, would be an object upon the manufacture of which some care might be bestowed, but when relegated to Fettar it comes from the hands of the peasant boy, and is of the rudest description.

Referring to the woman who had not even a stone whorl, but used, as we have seen, a potato, Dr Mitchell says—'This woman lived within a couple of hours' drive of a spinning mill and tweed factory, in which the best machinery was employed. Yet she continued to use the spindle, with a potato for its fly wheel. Though much closer to the centres of progress than the Fettar woman, the art of spinning, as she practised it, was in a still ruder state. From a potato to a stone whorl is

progress. From a stone whorl to a potato is degradation. Just the degradation, however, which we encounter as an old art wanes when a new art supplants it. The old art, in such circumstances, does not flourish and grow stronger and better. It sickens and dies out by a process of decline.' Another and very different illustration is elsewhere adduced by our author to establish this proposition, viz., that evidence of culture may co-exist with what we commonly accept as an evidence of the want of it. Upon a slab in the burial ground of Elgin Cathedral there is engraved the motto 'Memento mori.' These classical words, deeply cut, indicate a certain amount of culture, while the date 1603, proves that they were executed in no very distant age, but below there is a representation of a skull with a bone lying across its grinning mouth, which as Dr Mitchell remarks, 'Is just such a thing as we might believe to be the work of an uncultured savage. It is coarse and brutal in idea, and in execution it is much poorer than many sculpturings known to be the work of the lowest savages in the world. The repulsive and rudely executed Death's Head, and the well lettered motto are synchronous, but they look as if they had got together by some great mistake. They indicate two states of culture very remote from each other, but in point of fact they co-existed in one man.' I was shown when in St Andrews some years ago the tombstone of our townsman Archbishop Sharp. It was doubtless executed with great care and in the most approved style of art of that age. The workmanship is I believe foreign, probably owing to the fact that no sculptor could then have been found capable of producing anything so good. But it is after all a hideous and clumsy erection. There is a coarse representation of the last scene in the Prelate's life, while the slab upon which this is cut rests upon a row of skulls. The latter are cleverly done, if I recollect aright, but exhibit a taste which one trusts is now confined to such places as Ashantee. In the same town the visitor is shown a mace of beautifully wrought metal, elegant in design and execution. It is two hundred years older than the tomb. During these two hundred years the world had in some respects advanced. The art of printing, for example, had widely developed, and material comforts greatly increased. But there had been a retrograde movement at the same time. The clumsy Dutch mason of the seventeenth century falls far short of the skilled artificer of the fifteenth.

Another illustration of Dr Mitchell's theory is afforded by articles of earthenware. We all know that recently in this county an urn of clay, rude both in shape and ornament, was discovered. From the circumstances attending the discovery, there can be no doubt of its great age, but it would be a mistake to suppose that all such articles now in existence can boast an equal antiquity. In 1863, Dr Mitchell found a stone breaker in the island of Lewis eating his dinner

out of a vessel which struck the learned antiquary as remarkable. It was purchased upon the spot, and the liberal price given speedily led to the production of many similar articles by the inhabitants of the district. Such dishes are called *Craggans*. 'We learned,' says Dr Mitchell, 'that at a period by no means remote they had been made in many of the villages of the Lewis, though at the time of our visit their manufacture was chiefly, if not entirely, confined to Barvas. We were told that it was woman's work to make them, and one of the makers was pointed out to us as particularly skilful. The clay she used underwent no careful or special preparation. She chose the best she could get, and picked out of it the larger stones, leaving the sand and the finer gravel which it contained. With her hands alone she gave to the clay its desired shape. She had no aid from anything of the nature of a potter's wheel for making the smaller *craggans* with narrow necks; she used a stick with a curve on it to give form to the inside. All that her fingers could reach was done with them. The rudest pottery ever discovered among the relics of the Stone Age is not ruder than this, and no savages now in the world are known to make pottery of a coarser character.'

The house in which this women lived who made this pottery for our instruction, was squalid and wretched enough, but still we saw in it cottons from Manchester, crockery from Staffordshire, cutlery from Sheffield, sugar from the West Indies, tea from China, and tobacco from Virginia. Here there was a woman living in a wretched and perishable hut, built without cement, of ungrained and unshaped stones, busily manufacturing just such pottery as was made by the early pre-historic inhabitants of Scotland—just such pottery as is now made by some of the most degraded savages in the world. Yet her comforts and wants were ministered to not only by the great towns of England, but by the Indies, China, and America.

If we buried her, house and all, what might a digging in the spot disclose a century hence? Her bones, her whorl, her quern, and her *craggans*. That Sheffield, Manchester, India, China, and America had sent her of their products and manufactures, there would remain no evidence. There might be a puzzle, however, about the contributions from Staffordshire, the broken crockery, and perhaps as a consequence, an ingenious speculation about an early and a late occupation of the ruined hut by successive people at long intervals and in different stages of progress and culture.

From the evidence afforded to him upon this occasion, Dr Mitchell arrives at the following conclusion:—

(1) That the very rudest known form of an art may co-exist in a nation with the highest—the Wedgewoods of Etruria, with the Macleods of Barvas.

(2) That it would be wrong and stupid to conclude from this that the nation must be composed partly of

savages and partly of a highly cultured and civilised people.

(3.) That persons capable of immediately receiving the very highest culture may practise this art just as it is practised by the most degraded savages of whom we have a knowledge.'

In a hovel in Caithness Dr Mitchell found a stone table, formed of two rude upright blocks made both fast with an undressed slab laid across them. He saw the inhabitants seated round this article of furniture eating their dinner. 'When the turf hut,' he says, 'in which I saw it falls to ruin, nearly all trace of a human habitation there will disappear, for the hovel will crumble to dust, and be literally blown away. But the solid stone table will remain. What will then be thought of it when discovered by the antiquary it is not easy to tell.'

In the same county in 1867 he saw a huge undressed monolith—which at first he most naturally took for an ancient standing stone. A recent date carved upon it attracted his attention, and led to enquiries, when he found that this stone was erected in memory of a marriage which had taken place in that neighbourhood about six years previous to his visit. This fact may in course of time be forgotten, and the stone relegated to that pre-historic period which is generally supposed to have witnessed the erection of our circles and cairns.

With reference to the well-known classification of antiquities into the Stone, Bronze, and Iron Ages, Dr Mitchell points out that such a classification 'has no absolute chronological signification, and does not furnish dates; that it equally fails to indicate stages of culture and capacity in the sense of being invariable gradations of progress towards the existing culture and capacity; necessarily consecutive, and invariably applicable to all the race of the human family—that the three ages, even though they may successfully present themselves in the countries lying close to each other, do not of necessity synchronise—that is, the one country may still be in the Stone Age, while the other is passing into its Iron Age, and that the antiquities of each country must be separately studied with reference to the fitness to it of such a classification.

Perhaps the lingering of the past amidst the present is even more strikingly illustrated by the existence in more or less remote districts of ancient superstition. Upon this subject, much light may be thrown by local antiquaries.

'Dr G. informs me,' says Dr Mitchell, 'that some time ago he was summoned to see a poor man who had suddenly died, and who had been subject to epileptic seizures. His friends told Dr G. that at least they had the comfort of knowing that everything had been done which could have been done. On asking what remedies they had tried, he was told that among other things a cock had been buried alive below the epileptic's bed, and the spot was pointed out. Not many years have

elapsed since this sacrifice was openly offered to the demon of epilepsy in an improving town, to which the railway conveys the traveller, and which has six churches and ten schools for a population of four thousand.'

After this, we can hardly be startled by the discovery of any lingering superstition, however monstrous in its nature.

The burning of the clavie, as practised in Burghead, is another very curious legacy of the past. 'No account,' says Dr Mitchell, 'of this curious ceremony is so good as that which appeared in the *Banffshire Journal*, and which Mr Robert Chambers has quoted in his *Book of Days*.' The clavie is simply a portion of a tar barrel fixed upon a pole, filled with fuel and soaked in tar. When lighted, it is carried in triumph round all the vessels in the harbour. The word *clavie* is said to be a variation of a Banffshire word *clivvie*, meaning a cleft stick for holding a rush light. The '*peer man*' means, I understand, the same thing. I am glad to learn that this instrument is to form the subject of a paper at our August conference.

This Burghead custom has been traced back for a long period by means of the ecclesiastical records. It was esteemed in times past, and doubtless rightly so reckoned, a practice of religious origin, not Christian, but 'Heathenish and idolatrous.' It does not appear to have been confined to the coast, because there is an act against clavies in the Kirk-Session records of the parish of Inveraven, the preamble of which is as follows:—'Whereas it hath been the custom and practise of many in this parish of Inveravine, to goe about ye folds and cornes with kindled torches of fin, superstitiouslie and idolatrouslye, ascribing yt power to the fire, sanctifyinge ye cornes and cattell, qch is only proper to the true and living God, a practice proper rather to the heathens who are ignorant of God than to be practised by them yt live under the light of the glorious Gospell.' By the extracts now given from Dr Mitchell's book, you will observe that he does not belong to the school of antiquaries immortalized by Scott in his character of Jonathan Olebuck. He is not prepared to discover a prætorium in every unexplained mound and hollow; with whatever theories he may have set out, the plain facts which have been forced upon his observation in the course of his many journeyings throughout our own country have compelled him to receive with caution the canons of archæological science. I think that all archæologists are indebted to him for this word of warning—for his healthy scepticism—which may save us from mistakes often proved, like that of Scott's hero, to be simply ludicrous.

Dr Mitchell is a type of the intelligent antiquary, in whose opinion an ancient manufacture or custom does not lose by the fact of its having lingered on out of the past into the present. Proof of this fact may render the antiquity of some particular whorl, quern, or craggan,

preserved in our museums, a matter of doubt; but the antiquity of such articles as a class remains quite unaffected. 'There is sometimes,' he says, 'it appears to me, an unwillingness to look at all sides of objects classed as ancient, lest something should be discovered which might reduce their age, and render them possibly modern and commonplace.' To some, no doubt, it does make such a thing as a whorl a less interesting and curious object to know that it may be either of very great age, or in the most literal sense a thing of yesterday; but the study of antiquities has ceased to be the study of the merely curious, and takes rank now with the study of history. The love of the wonderful, however, still holds sway to no small extent, and often shows itself in the manner alluded to—that is, in a certain unwillingness to see what may overthrow accepted and cherished opinions. Yet why should there be hesitation about the publishing of what is believed to be a fact? Prevailing ideas are not things to be protected. If they rest on error or imperfect information, why should they not fall? The whole material from which archæologists draw their conclusions are as yet very scanty, and most of their conclusions can only be safely stated as probably correct in view of the information we possess, and as liable to change into a fuller knowledge.

At the close Mr Spence moved a vote of thanks to the Sheriff for his able paper, and that it be printed in the Club's Transactions.