

## Obituary

OSWALD BARRON, 1868–1939: Oswald Barron, a Fellow of this Society since 1901, died, to the sincere grief of his many friends, on 24th September at the age of 71. It is hard for one who was his intimate friend for more than thirty-five years to know where to begin to write something about that rare personality and his work. He was so many-sided. The facets of his mental polyhedron were so sparkling; his zest for life was so vivid. He flung himself with such relish into whatever he had to do. And he was so sure of himself that his self-confidence was an inspiration to those on whom it impinged.

Of his home life this is not the place to speak. No more need be said of his adored home than that it was crammed from floor to roof with books and countless little treasures, full of happy memories of travel, sure symbols of the art of collecting with discrimination. But of the man himself one may be allowed to speak freely.

He had a genius for friendship. Few Fellows had, I suppose, so large a circle of acquaintances; not many had in so full a measure the gift of gathering and of returning loyal friendship. He was curiously reticent in some regards; but when once his confidence and his friendship were given they never wavered: they were yours for life.

Barron was a great talker. He loved talking; and he always had something interesting to say. One did not always agree with him; but he delighted in argument and his talk was always inspiring and suggestive. His mind was so alert that even when, towards the end, ill health laid a constraining hand on his activities, his interest in people and things never forsook him; and he bore his disabilities with a courage and patience as pathetic as they were admirable.

No doubt it is as a writer that Oswald Barron will be best remembered. He possessed in a remarkable degree what one of his colleagues of the Press once described to me as 'the gift of the unexpected word'. Perhaps the best piece of archaeological work that Barron accomplished was the editing of that brilliant periodical *The Ancestor*, to which he himself was the principal and outstanding contributor. Controversial though his articles often were, even those on whom his lash fell most stingingly must, one thinks, have chuckled at his wit. And those great quartos, *Northamptonshire Families* and *Hertfordshire Families*, which he produced in the old days of V.C.H., are monuments of arduous research and patterns of solid archaeology of the kind that he knew best. They display in every line the author's passion for truth and his unsparing condemnation of so much of that engaging nonsense which passed for genealogy before Barron and those who wrought with him took pen in hand.

But dearer, I believe, to Barron's heart even than those massive archaeological feats was that astonishing output, over the pen-name of *The Londoner*, which flowed in a pellucid stream from his brain, day by day for something like thirty years. Some of us used to wait eagerly night after night for what O. B. had to say; many, I know, only bought the paper in which they appeared for the sake of those articles, which were so fresh and so pleasant

to read, and apparently produced with such ease. But those in his confidence knew well how Barron laboured at them, how he agonized to turn out those columns of flawless diction so that they satisfied his own perfect taste. How fascinating they were in their pretty affectation of antique verbiage, their new presentation of old things, their use of words and phrases which few writers seem able to command! In those *Londoner* papers we saw Barron at his best, Barron as his intimates knew him, precise, whimsical, learned, fastidious. I well remember a famous journalist saying to me, 'The *Londoner's* articles are more than journalism; they are literature.' Alas! that he was only once persuaded to republish some of that fine stuff, a tiny volume of some thirty papers, which one on whose judgement he relied implicitly considered the best and most characteristic examples of the work of several years. It is now hard to come by a copy. The book fell very flat, and for an odd reason. Barron insisted on having it bound in black cloth; and he had his way, though any bookseller could have told him that the public simply will not look at books bound in black!

To us of the Society Oswald was best known and recognized as the greatest herald of to-day. Heraldry was indeed his chief and abiding love. 'The little science', as he called it, appealed to the archaeological side of him for its value as the handmaid of genealogy; to his orderly mind because of its precision; to his sense of beauty on account of the seemliness of its art. I shall never forget how, many years ago when he came to stay with me down in the west country, his first words as he walked into my study were: 'Where are the heraldry shelves?' It was a kind of second nature with him, an essential part of his being. And though he never thrust heraldry on people who had no interest in the matter, no man was more ready than he to help the student and to share that profound knowledge of the subject which his prodigious and unerring memory for names and blazons gave him.

But he had no patience with the tangle of nomenclature with which the handbooks had succeeded, augur-like, in making a beautiful simple thing difficult and obscure. Heraldry, he always felt—even the heraldry of days later than his beloved Middle Ages—ought to be, and properly handled could be, a thing of that common sense which was apparent to his eye in the ancient rolls of arms, the seals, and the heraldic paintings of the olden time. For that he fought with an amusing vehemence of vituperation which some of us who are proud to follow his teaching like to believe is having its effect.

When at the Coronation Barron became Maltravers we all knew that no honour could have been more grateful to him. It is pleasant to remember that not only Fellows of the Society but many others who admired *The Londoner* were able to show in a tangible way how greatly we rejoiced with him that that recognition of his merits and his learning had at length been made.

Once again Death has struck his blue pencil through an honoured name on the Society's roll, and though it will be hard to fill his place it is more than gratifying to us to whom Oswald Barron and his work were very dear to be sure that hands are already stretched out to carry forward his heraldic torch. For after all no man is irreplaceable; and though this man has gone from us we believe that his influence and the memory of him will endure.

E. E. D.