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HAROLD IDRIS BELL

HAROLD IDRIS BELL, 1879–1967

Sir Harold Idris Bell, papyrologist, historian of the early Roman Empire, and President of the Society from 1937 to 1945, died on 22nd January, 1967, in his 87th year.

'Did you drop your coin in the Fountain of Trevi?' he wrote in 1959 to the writer of this notice. 'We did, I remember, on more than one visit. I should like to see Rome again, though probably I shan't. Strangely enough—not perhaps so strange after all, for I have always been a Hellenist rather than a Romanist—it has been mediaeval and early modern Rome rather than ancient Rome which has fascinated me—except the Forum, of which I never tire.' The words are those of the dreamer, the connoisseur of Welsh poetry as well as the Hellenist who fell under the spell of Wilamowitz in his youth. The apparent paradox between the man of imagination and the man of affairs is resolved by the gift of sympathy, which made Bell a first-rate interpreter of papyrus documents, and especially letters, a contributor of material of the front rank to the history of the early Empire and an excellent evaluator of that material, as well as an effective President of the Roman Society during a particularly difficult period of its life.

Bell's working days were spent at a desk in the British Museum. He joined its staff in 1903 and retired in 1945 as Keeper and Egerton Librarian. A chance meeting (perhaps partly engineered) with Kenyon, then engaged on the third volume of the *Catalogue of Greek Papyri in the British Museum*, made Bell into his assistant and shaped his future development as a papyrologist, a field in which he was to outstrip his master. In the 1967 number of the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* Mr. T. C. Skeat and the writer have traced the stages in his career and essayed a preliminary assessment of his contribution to scholarship. A bibliography of his writings on the ancient world, complete to date of publication, was published in Volume 40 of that same journal brought out in his honour in 1954. The bibliography has been brought up to date in *JEA* 53 (1967), by Dr. David Thomas, who was Bell's last pupil. Bell's output was massive in quantity, always of high quality, and stretched over a wide field of time and a dispersed range of disciplines. The first papyrus text he published (in 1907) was a fragment of the poet Aratus, followed by a long account of a papyrus manuscript of Isocrates. In the following year (1908) he had drawn up a comprehensive survey of the Aphrodito papyri of the Arabic period, the British Museum's share of which were edited in Vol. IV of the catalogue over Bell's name in 1910. The decipherment and elucidation of these complex and crabbed documents was a real challenge to palaeographical skill, admirably met and surmounted. Bell was an incomparable palaeographer, and his critical faculty was always vigilant to discover ways by which the mind might test and approve or reject what the eye sees.

The reader of this *Journal* will naturally give pride of place to Bell's masterly edition of Claudius' Letter to the Alexandrines, P. London 1912 (or 'P. Jews' as it is familiarly abbreviated in papyrus publications). This letter, which came into the possession of the Museum in 1921, was published in 1924 together with Christian letters of the time of the Meletian schism acquired in 1922 and 1923. Technically the edition was a brilliant achievement, presented with sureness and accuracy. Minimal gleanings were left for others in the reading of difficult traces or the restoration of involved passages. The letter's significance was succinctly set out and brilliantly analysed. Subsequent discussions have expanded rather than altered the assessment of the editor in this *editio princeps*. Only on the question of the nature of the two embassies and the suggestion that both were Jewish has a point of substance been added to exegesis by the numerous and voluminous *epigoni*.

As a result of this publication Bell was invited, through the mediation of Wilhelm Schubart (one of many foreign scholars with whom Bell was on intimate terms) to essay an historical account of Antisemitism in Alexandria, published as *Juden und Griechen im römischen Alexandria* (Leipzig, 1926). Thus did Bell come to a realization of his interest in and capacity for the writing of history, powers which bore fruit in the chapters on 'Egypt under the Early Principate' in the *Cambridge Ancient History* Vol. X, 1934, and 'Egypt, Crete and Cyrenaica: Egypt' in the *Cambridge Ancient History* Vol. XI, 1936. After his retirement Bell summarized the history of *Egypt from Alexander the Great to Justinian* in 1948, a short but far from superficial book; and he charted a prudent yet imaginative course through the religious history of Egypt in *Cults and Creeds*, 1953. In 1936 he had issued proposals for a Social History of Egypt, a plan unfortunately never realized.

Bell was first elected to the Council of the Roman Society in 1934. At the Annual General Meeting of that year he read a paper on 'The Roman Record in Egypt'. It is to this time that the present writer's recollections of him go back. Fortnightly visits from Oxford to the Keeper's sanctum in the Department of Manuscripts were prized occasions. Lady Bell (who died just one week before her husband) and he were interested in all that went on around them: serious causes, the Spanish war, and also more light-hearted ones, and there were plenty of anecdotes. I remember Bell's telling me of his hope that one day he would find a letter on papyrus written by a soldier on Roman service in Britain, a hope that has not yet been fulfilled. 1937, the year in which he became President

of the Society, saw also the first of many contributions to this *Journal*, a publication of a wooden tablet from Egypt containing a Latin registration of birth. In the following year he read and published his paper on 'The Economic Crisis in Egypt under Nero'.

When the war came Bell agreed to continue as President of the Society and he served in this capacity until the summer of 1945. He gave much valued support to Miss M. V. Taylor in her organization of the 'Triennial Meeting' of the Greek and Roman Societies, which first met at Oxford in the summer of 1942, and which enjoyed a phenomenal success. Colleagues will recollect with pleasure his reappearances at these meetings (the last being at Oxford in 1955). In retirement he was as busy as in his active days, and held office as President of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, President of the British Academy, President of the Classical Association and President of the International Association of Papyrologists. The furtherance of co-operation between scholars was congenial work to him, and he would have taken pleasure in the tributes paid to him by foreign scholars since his death. Perhaps I may finish this short and inadequate notice by quoting from a letter of Marcel Hombert of the University of Brussels, written in January this year: 'I have been recalling old memories, and recollecting, not without emotion, the kindness and generosity with which H. I. Bell welcomed me to the British Museum, and the patience with which he guided my exercises in decipherment. One of the great figures of papyrology has disappeared. In the memory of all who knew Sir Harold Bell, the qualities of the man will remain intimately associated with his merits as a scholar.'

E. G. T.