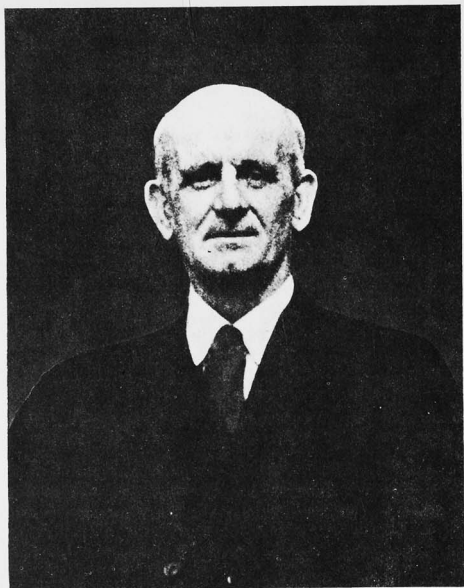


PLATE III



JOHN ALLAN, 1945

## JOHN ALLAN

1884-1955

THE last thing that John Allan would have wished would be the publication of a memoir of himself. Such was his innate modesty. Nevertheless, it is fit and proper that a brief record be made for posterity of the life and works of such a distinguished scholar, and a tribute paid to a most lovable personality.

John Allan was born on 8 August 1884 at Bolton, Haddington, the eldest son of John Gray Allan, the local schoolmaster, who afterwards became headmaster of Longniddry. Young John was particularly attached to the Lowlands, where he had his roots, and whither he regularly returned from London to tramp, fish, play golf, and enjoy the natural beauties of the Scottish countryside. In spite of his long sojourn of forty-two years in the Metropolis he never lost the accent of East Lothian. He was immensely proud of being a Borderer, and he knew intimately the historical lore and folk-tales of his native land. As an instance there was his great interest in the Scottish gipsies, with whom he came in contact at an early age at their celebrated centre at Yetholm, one of the places where his father had been a dominie, and their language naturally appealed to his linguistic flair.

He entered the Royal High School, Edinburgh, in 1899 in his fifteenth year. A schoolfellow, Norman Macleod, recalls (in a private letter 11 December 1955) that the authorities had some difficulty in placing him, for in all subjects, except German, he was fully qualified for the Fifth Modern Class, which had studied German for at least two years, and Allan knew no German. However, by the end of the year he was at the top of the German class in the Fifth Modern. This was characteristic of him, the effortless assimilation of knowledge stored in his highly retentive memory. He left his school—of which he was ever a devoted former pupil—as *dux* in Modern Languages and Mathematics, an unusual combination, and proceeded to the university, where the rich promise of his schooldays was brilliantly maintained in other and wider fields of learning. His penchant for Classical Philology led him naturally to specialize in Sanskrit and other languages of the sub-continent of India. Perhaps his memories of the Romanies at Yetholm influenced his choice.

From Edinburgh University he proceeded to the University of Leipzig, where he continued his studies both in modern and oriental languages. In 1907, following the customary Civil Service examination, he was admitted to the Department of Coins and Medals in the British Museum, where he began duty on 25 February as an Assistant of the Second Class. His first task was the registration and classification of the Arabic and Indian coins, and more especially those of China and Japan, where there had been a large influx of recent acquisitions. His predecessor in the departmental oriental field had been E. J. Rapson, who had resigned the previous year on the occasion of his appointment to Cambridge as Professor of Sanskrit. Allan was a more than worthy successor, who later carried forward the good work of cataloguing the Indian coins for the Museum Trustees, that had been so signally started by Professor Stanley Lane-Poole and Professor Percy Gardner.

The Keeper of the Department of Coins and Medals, when Allan was admitted, was H. A. Grueber, who retired in 1912 to be succeeded by G. F. Hill, whose régime lasted until 1931, when he was appointed Director and Principal Librarian (1931-6). Under this distinguished savant Allan had the advantage of being able to devote himself in the main to those numismatic studies that earned him a world-wide reputation. When Hill became Keeper the Trustees considered, no doubt at the time justifiably, that Allan was too young to be made Assistant-Keeper of the Department (which at that time was the equivalent of the modern grade of Deputy-Keeper). He did become an Assistant of the First Class in 1913 and an Assistant-Keeper in 1921. Made Deputy-Keeper in 1924 and Keeper in 1931 he retired in 1949, after which he returned to his beloved Edinburgh as Lecturer in Sanskrit, a post he held at the time of his death. Whilst still at the British Museum he had been a part-time lecturer in Sanskrit at University College, London (1909-17), and at the School of Oriental Studies (1920-2). He had also acted as an Examiner in Indian subjects for various British and Indian universities.

Allan's earliest publications, apart from odd reviews, were 'The Coinage of Assam' and 'The Coinage of the Maldive Islands with some Notes on the Cowrie and Larin', both of which were printed in the *Numismatic Chronicle* for 1909 and 1914 respectively. These are still standard works of reference. It was in 1914 that there appeared his first magisterial compilation, the *B.M. Catalogue of the Coins of the Gupta Dynasties and of Śaśaṅka, King of Gauḍa*.

This has held precedence ever since in the field of Gupta studies. This *magnum opus* was rivalled in 1936 by his *B.M. Catalogue of the Coins of Ancient India*, a masterly handling of a most complicated, but very important, series of coins. It has to be borne in mind that a modern British Museum Catalogue is not merely a descriptive account of the objects under review, but a scholarly treatment of the whole material in relation to history, epigraphy, metrology, symbolism, &c. The extensive *Introductions* to each volume are thus serious interpretations of all the relevant numismatic data available. It is, therefore, not surprising that he produced only two such *Catalogues* in the course of his forty-two years on the staff of the Museum. Apart from the inevitable interruptions to study occasioned in a public Department, and the onerous duties of administration that finally fell upon his shoulders, the production of two such monuments of ripe scholarship was a notable achievement for their author. He also edited Volume IV of the *Catalogue of the Coins in the Indian Museum, Calcutta*, in 1928, a most valuable source of information for most of the modern coins of the Indian Native States, and periodically he found time to bring to the notice of scholars, chiefly in the pages of the *Numismatic Chronicle* and the *British Museum Quarterly*, recent acquisitions made by the Museum throughout the years.

Many were the calls made upon his erudition, and often, be it said, imposed on his good nature. He always found it difficult to refuse a request for information or an opinion on all sorts of problems, not always confined to numismatics, of which his knowledge was profound. The help he so generously and willingly bestowed is embedded in many scholarly treatises by his contemporaries, sometimes the sole trace of which may be a brief acknowledgement in a preface, or at most a summary at the end of a volume. Amongst the more important of these contributions are the Appendixes he prepared for such outstanding publications as Sir Aurel Stein's *Serindia*, iii, 1921 (pp. 1340-50), and his *Innermost Asia*, 1928 (pp. 988-95); and Sir John Marshall's *Taxila*, ii, pp. 853-63. Stein paid a tribute to Allan's 'wide Oriental attainments enabling him to offer a series of valuable corrections' (*Serindia*, p. xxi) and Marshall was no less generous.

In all this Allan was never a mere numismatist. In fact, he scorned those over-zealous devotees of coin studies, whose myopic outlook led them to lay false emphasis on the value of the discipline unsupported by any historical or linguistic data

that might be available. His own phrase for the disease was *numismatic paranoia*. He himself showed by his contributions to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, and by his joint authorship with Sir Wolseley Haig and Professor H. H. Dodwell of the *Cambridge Shorter History of India* (1934),<sup>1</sup> that he had a well-balanced judgement and an intimate acquaintance with all kinds of historical documents appertaining to the period or subject on which he was discoursing. In this he was admirably aided by his phenomenal memory, which enabled him with consummate ease to throw light on some of the most abstruse and out-of-the-way questions that were frequently presented to him.

At an early stage in his career he began to subscribe to various societies engaged in antiquarian and other cultural pursuits, in which he took a delight, a practice that he continued all his days. In 1920 he became a Member of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, and in the same year he joined the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club, of which he became President in 1955. His keen interest in archaeology was recognized by his Vice-Presidency of the Society of Antiquaries of London (1949-54), of which he had been a Fellow since 1927, and elected to Council in 1935. In 1933 he had been made a member of the select Essay Club, of which he became President in 1948. In 1937 he became a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and served on the Council 1950-3. He was also a member of the Council of the Scottish Anthropological Society. A minor activity of his was to represent Edinburgh University on the Committee of the Scottish Field School in Archaeology, and he regularly attended conferences of the Museums Association. He maintained a strong link with his old school by acting as secretary of the Royal High School Club in London for twenty-nine years and as its President in 1932. He was actually President-Designate of the club in Edinburgh when he died.

But the greatest service he rendered any of the learned societies with which he was associated was his active participation for many years in the affairs of the Royal Numismatic Society, of which he was an Honorary Secretary for forty years (1908-48). Made an editor of that society's *Numismatic Chronicle*

<sup>1</sup> Dr. A. L. Basham, Reader in the History of India at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, has characterized this as 'one of the best outlines of early Indian History so far written' (in a private letter to the present writer).

in 1921 and senior editor in 1931, he continued with this exacting occupation, to which he devoted much of his personal leisure, until 1950, maintaining at a high level the editorial standard of that notable numismatic publication. In these editorial and secretarial tasks, as well as in his official duties as Keeper of Coins and Medals at what has well been described as 'the focal point of the study of numismatics in Britain', John Allan exercised considerable influence. His reputation as a scholarly numismatist and orientalist was world wide, as can be seen by the list of his awards enumerated below.

In view of his unselfish devotion to the well-being of the Royal Numismatic Society over so long a period, it is, indeed, surprising that he was never elected to fill the Presidency. It was known that he was not averse to having his name proposed in 1948, but by a slight majority he was out-voted, and a younger man was elected. That this was out of no spirit of disrespect was evident by the handsome response made by Fellows of the society shortly afterwards to an appeal for a presentation to him on the occasion of his retirement from the post of secretary. It was then put on record that:

Mr. Allan's Secretaryship has ensured the strength and continuity of the Society in a period of exceptional difficulties. His wisdom and judgment, freely available to a succession of fellow-officers, have enabled it to move steadily forward from the massive position in which Sir John Evans left it, and to survive the severe economic and social dislocations of two world wars.

In 1936, in the year of the Royal Numismatic Society's centenary, he was awarded its medal, a similar honour being paid the same year by the American Numismatic Society of New York, and he was twice a medallist (in 1928 and 1937) of the Numismatic Society of India, of which he had been a member since 1911.

He was a Corresponding Member of various learned societies abroad, notably the Royal Swedish Academy of Literature, History and Antiquity, the Archaeological Society of Finland,<sup>1</sup> and the Numismatic Societies of New York, Paris, Vienna, and Zagreb. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1941 and in 1948 he was given the honour of the C.B. In the year of his retirement from the British Museum, 1949, the University of Edinburgh gave him the Honorary Degree of LL.D. These latter honours particularly pleased him.

<sup>1</sup> In 1946 he visited Sweden and Finland on the invitation of the Swedish Museums Association and the Finnish Archaeological Commission.

In appearance John Allan was tall and well built, with a strikingly developed skull that suggested the rich mental treasures stored therein. A man of wide accomplishments and great erudition, his innate generosity, his kindly understanding, his cheerful sense of humour, his ardent desire to help others, and withal his modest disposition gained him the admiration, affection, and lasting remembrance of all who ever knew him. Although possessed of considerable natural shyness and reserve, he was no recluse. Nothing gave him greater satisfaction than to spend pleasant hours in the congenial company of his wide circle of friends. The liberal and gracious hospitality that his wife<sup>1</sup> and he dispensed was always memorable. One of his old friends, Sir William Murrie, wrote of him thus:

He was a delightful host, and his generosity and unfailing freshness of interest brought out the best in the many friends who enjoyed his hospitality. He talked well, but he never monopolized the conversation, and you invariably came away from an evening in his company wishing that he had talked more and you less. There was never anything heavy about his talk, and he could expatiate as effectively about the musical comedies of the early 1900s, the latest foreign films, or the best wines within the capacity of a modest purse as about some abstruse problem in scholarship, and he spoke as naturally to a country gardener or a hill shepherd as to a professor.

Dr. H. W. Meikle, the Historiographer Royal for Scotland, another old friend, wrote of him (in a private letter to the present writer):

He certainly had a keen sense of humour and you will remember the chuckle with which he heard an amusing story though he was not essentially a raconteur. I remember asking him for a humorous story to tell at any historical gathering. 'One day', he said, 'a Scot came to the British Museum to show me some coins. I had a look at them and told him to leave them for a day or two so that I could examine them. The man seemed somewhat dubious.' 'Will I get them back?' he asked. 'Of course,' I replied, 'Why do you doubt it?' 'Well', said the man, 'aren't you the *Keeper* of Coins?'

During the First World War he was seconded to the Military Intelligence Department of the War Office (1915-18). At the beginning of the Second World War he had the arduous task of arranging the evacuation of the treasures of the Medal Room. During the war years, when he was not engaged in supervising

<sup>1</sup> His marriage to Ida, daughter of Mr. J. C. Law, Dundee, took place on 24 April 1914. She survives him together with a son and a daughter.

the safe custody of the evacuated material at the repository in the country, he was in charge of the business of not only his own Department of Coins and Medals but also of the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, and, at times, as Senior Keeper, he was Acting-Director in the absence of Sir John Forsdyke.

It was a most grievous blow to him when in May 1941, during a German air-raid, the Medal Room was completely destroyed. Fortunately for the Museum the coins and most of the departmental books had been safely removed to the country, but, unfortunately for him many of his own private papers and belongings had been stored there, and were lost in the conflagration. Amongst these was the manuscript of his next *Catalogue of the Coins of Mediaeval India* (alas destined never to be completed by him) as well as his collection of notes on the Scottish Border.

Towards the end of his life he had the misfortune to lose the sight of one of his eyes, no doubt occasioned by his many years of minute scrutiny of obscure coins and ancient texts. He did not allow this to dispirit him: in fact, when, only a few weeks before his death, he paid his last visit to the Temporary Medal Room at the British Museum on his way back from a botanizing trip to Dauphiné, he was looking wonderfully happy and fit and full of future plans. Alas, this was not to be. He died on 29 August 1955 in the Chalmers Hospital, Edinburgh, following an operation.

*Requiescat in pace.*

JOHN WALKER

Acknowledgements for help in the preparation of this memoir are due to his widow, Mrs. Ida Allan, his son, Mr. John G. Allan, Miss V. M. Dallas, Mr. Christopher Blunt, Dr. E. S. G. Robinson, Mr. R. B. K. Stevenson, and Dr. R. B. Whitehead, as well as those already quoted in the above pages. A full bibliography of John Allan's publications is printed in the *Numismatic Chronicle* for 1956.