

OBITUARY NOTICE

ALEXANDER GEORGE ELLIS, M.A.

On the 17th March, one who had given a lifetime of service, valuable though unobtrusive, to the cause of Oriental studies, passed unnoticed from the scene at the ripe age of 84. Mr. A. G. Ellis was a familiar figure to more than one generation of members of this Society. He joined it as long ago as 1897, and from 1919 until his health began to fail some four years ago, filled the office of Honorary Librarian. He was the last in a direct family line of public servants, whose lives, incidentally, each approached or exceeded the span of ninety years. His great grandfather, a doctor of divinity, came to London from his native Yorkshire well back in the eighteenth century. His grandfather Sir Henry Ellis directed the British Museum from 1827 to 1856. His father Frederick Ellis served in the office of the Paymaster-General.

He himself passed from Merchant Taylors' School where he was solidly grounded in Hebrew as well as in the classics, to Queens' College, Cambridge, and there took a distinguished degree in Semitic Languages, having been privileged to sit at the feet of William Wright and other eminent Orientalists. Joining the staff of the British Museum in 1883, he spent the next twenty-six years chiefly in cataloguing Islamic literature, at first printed books and later both books and manuscripts, covering in this work an unusually wide field, for though he left Cambridge with a sound equipment in Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic, he soon extended his studies to include Persian, Turkish, and Armenian. He left the Museum in 1909 to take up the appointment of sub-librarian at the India Office where he served until his retirement at the prescribed age limit; but the Museum was once again to enjoy the benefit of his help, for in 1930, at the happy suggestion of Dr. Barnett, then Keeper of Oriental Books and Manuscripts, he returned to give part-time service in cataloguing the Armenian library, until declining health brought this activity as well as his work for the Society to a close.

In 1894 he published volume 1 of his *Catalogue of Arabic Books in the British Museum*, the second volume appearing in 1901. This valuable work of reference is well known to Arabists and contains descriptions of nearly all the printed Arabic literature

acquired by the Museum during the nineteenth century. He was also part author of the *Supplementary Catalogue* published in 1926. For his first ten years at the Museum Mr. Ellis had as a senior colleague Dr. Charles Rieu, author of the monumental catalogues of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish Manuscripts, and after Dr. Rieu's retirement he became to a large extent responsible for dealing with the Islamic manuscripts acquired by the Museum as well as books. Part of his labours in this field was published in 1912 under the title, *A Descriptive List of the Arabic Manuscripts acquired . . . since 1894 ; compiled by A. G. Ellis and E. Edwards*. He was also part author of the Catalogue of this Society's Library which appeared last year.

The extreme care and comprehensiveness displayed in his Museum Catalogue of Arabic Books moved a French reviewer to describe the author as " un bibliographe parfait ". If he had met the author himself he would have had every reason to confirm this verdict, for Mr. Ellis's astonishing powers as a bibliographer had to be seen in action to be believed. His was the type of mind which could seize and hold myriads of facts and produce any of them as required. Not only the titles and authors but the structure and contents of Oriental books and manuscripts, as well as multitudes of historical and philological details, were packed in his memory as in a vast card-index, and with unfailing kindness and good nature he liberally gave of this store to all who asked. Though assuredly much was lost to Muhammadan studies by reason of his rooted objection to express himself in print, he made some amends by this vital assistance he so often gave to other scholars in the preparation of their works, and if the few publications above mentioned are all that bear his name, the wide and accurate knowledge which he so freely dispensed is built into the foundations of many more.

Talking and walking were his two recreations, and in both his stamina was remarkable. In his prime he would tramp vast distances across country without turning a hair, and it was only on the verge of eighty that he bowed with an ill grace to the necessity of limiting his Saturday afternoon walk to nine or ten miles. His favourite haunt was the Chilterns where he knew every farm, hamlet, hedge, and pathway with the same exactitude as the titles, authors, contents, and even pressmarks of the Islamic volumes in the British Museum.

A. S. FULTON.