

OBITUARY NOTICE

WILLIAM IRVINE

WILLIAM IRVINE, distinguished as a student of the history of Mahomedan India, died on November 3, 1911. He was for many years a member of the Council, and latterly a Vice-President, of the Royal Asiatic Society, and it is fitting that some memorial of him should find a place in the pages of this Journal, to which he has so frequently contributed.

Irvine was born in Aberdeen in 1840, and in 1863 he went to India in the Indian Civil Service, being the first man of his year in the Provincial list. His province was the Province of Agra, better known at that time as the North-West Provinces, and now officially called the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh; and in this province he served till he retired. Having an inherited aptitude for legal studies (his father had been an advocate, which is the Scottish equivalent for the French *avocat*), Irvine at the outset betook himself to law, and his first work was a digest of the Rent Acts of the province, published in 1868, while he was still an assistant. He came to be regarded as an authority on all questions of rent and revenue law, and his opinion in such matters was sometimes sought by the Board of Revenue, the highest appellate authority. It was not until after 1875 that Irvine seriously took to the study of Indian history. At that time he was stationed at Farrakhabād, and happened to come into possession of the private papers and letters of the local Nawābs, a family of Afghan adventurers who in the eighteenth century had risen to power and made

themselves masters of the place, and the last of whom perished miserably in the Mutiny. An account of these Nawābs in the JASB. for 1878–9 was his earliest historical work—indeed, the only historical work which he published while in India. From Farrakhabād Irvine went in 1879 as Magistrate and Collector to Ghazipur, where in addition to his ordinary duties he had to superintend the revision of the Revenue records, an arduous and difficult task which he performed with conspicuous ability. He retired in 1889. Had he remained he must have risen to the highest administrative posts in the province, but he chose to retire early, and on his retirement he devoted himself to the study of the history of India under the Mahomedans. While in India he had acquired the power of reading the Persian and Hindi script with ease; he now betook himself to the study of the MSS. to be found in the British Museum and the India Office. He also employed men in India to collect MSS. for him. His purpose was to write the history of the decline and fall of the Moghul Empire from the death of Aurungzeb in 1707 to the capture of Delhi by Lord Lake in 1803. This had been done by Mr. Keene and others, but not on the scale which Irvine planned, nor after any exhaustive examination of the available materials. Copious extracts from the MSS. he studied formed the basis of Irvine's work; round these he built up his remarks and explanations. Besides the purely historical details Irvine devoted much attention to collateral subjects, such as the constitution of the Moghul nobility, the administrative system, the system of land revenue, and the organization of the army. Ballads, diaries, letters, charters, rules of official practice and imperial rescripts, coins and seals, he made himself conversant with them all. Native authorities were the mainstay of his history, but he was equally at home with the European travellers of the time, and the doings of the various East India Companies, more especially the

English and the French. Much of the information which he thus laboriously gathered was given to the world in contributions to the *Indian Antiquary* and the Journals of the Royal Asiatic Society and the Asiatic Society of Bengal. The first chapters of his history appeared in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1896, and in it he published the succeeding chapters from time to time, but the work is an unfinished torso. It never got beyond the accession of Mahomed Shāh (1719), although Irvine published dissertations on some of the later episodes, and had collected all the material down to the sack of Delhi by Nādir Shāh in 1737 A.D., and less completely down to 1761. His paper on the Moghul army in the JRAS. for 1896 was followed by his book on the same subject, published in 1903. He contributed the chapter on Mahomedan history to the new *Gazetteer of India*, in which he managed to compress much fresh matter into little space. The life of Aurungzeb, originally prepared for the *Encyclopédie d'Islam*, being too lengthy for that work, was published in the *Indian Antiquary* for 1911. This was his latest important publication. He contributed a large number of translations and shorter papers to various periodicals, and frequently appeared as a reviewer in the pages of this Journal. Among the more important of these shorter pieces I may mention the following: "The Baillie Collection of Arabic and Persian MSS.," in the JRAS. for 1905. In the JASB., "Baiswari Folk Songs" (1884); "Note on the Official Reckonings of the Reigns of the later Moghul Emperors" (1893); "Guru Gobind Singh and Bandah" (1894); "Jangnāmah of Farukhsiyar and Jahāndār Shāh" (1900); this was a historical ballad in Hindi, as was the "Jangnāmah of Sayyad 'Alim 'Ali Khan", which appeared in the JA. in 1904. Among other articles of his in the JA., I may mention "Notes on some Anglo-Indian Words" (1900) and a paper on "Aurungzeb's Family" (1901); also "Ahmad Shāh,

Abdali, and the Indian Wazir 'Imad-ul-Mulk" (1907). To Miss Manning's little magazine he contributed a translation of a most interesting visit by a Mahomedan traveller to a Hindu *mela* on the Ganges in the early part of the eighteenth century. In 1908 the Asiatic Society of Bengal did him the honour to make him an Honorary Member.

Constable, the publisher, first drew Irvine's attention to Manucci. Manucci was only known to the world by Catron's abridgment, and Catron had used Manucci's text with so much freedom, and added so much of his own, that the work was useless for historical purposes. Now Manucci, although garrulous and a gossip, is after Bernier the best European authority we have for the condition of things in India under Aurungzeb. Irvine has told the world in his Preface the story of his hunt for the original MSS. of Manucci in the libraries of Venice and Berlin. Successful in this quest, he laid aside the history which had hitherto formed his chief occupation, and set himself to translating and editing Manucci. At the suggestion of the Royal Asiatic Society, the work was published by the Government of India in the Indian Texts Series—a series which owes its origin to the enlightened suggestion of Lord Curzon. Long before Manucci was finished, Irvine had been attacked by the disease to which he ultimately succumbed; and although he returned to his Indian history, it was only to bring it to a close.

Irvine's conception of history was much like that which is at present in vogue at the *École des Chartes*. History was to be mainly occupied with the search for, and investigation of, original authorities, and to be an exact chronicle of the doings of the time. Although Irvine did not neglect such picturesque touches as he might find in his authorities, he did not profess to be an artist, nor would he consider historical narrative a fine art. Still less was he

a philosophical historian : he was doubtful of generalities, and he seldom attempted generalizations. His strength lay in detail, and to be faultlessly accurate was his pride. Two things especially attracted him : he had a Scottish love of genealogies and an equal love of precise dates. The diarists of the Moghul Court were one of his chief quarries, and he drew up comparative tables for his own use, in which every month and every day of the week for several centuries was shown according to the Mahomedan calendar. For his task of historian he was otherwise thoroughly equipped. He had an excellent working knowledge of Persian and Hindi, and also some acquaintance with Arabic. Although not a classical scholar, he had a wide and thorough knowledge of several European languages, especially French, German, and Italian. With a view to translating Manucci, who often employed Portuguese amanuenses, he learnt Portuguese. Both nature and training made Irvine an excellent judge of evidence, and his style was clear, logical, and to the point, an instrument well fitted for his purpose. What he had to say was always worth the hearing. In knowledge of his particular period of history he was unrivalled. Had his history ever been completed it might have compared not unfavourably with the work of two other Scotchmen, Leyden and Erskine.

But Irvine is best known to the world as the editor of Manucci. His historical studies had made his name familiar to other scholars engaged in similar pursuits, but Manucci brought him into contact with a much wider public. As a commentator Irvine excelled ; he searched Europe, Asia, and America to explain an obscure allusion or to settle a date. The work showed such an amount and variety of learning that one critic remarked that it must have been edited by a syndicate of scholars. Irvine's Manucci now takes its place as a classic beside Yule's Marco Polo.

I have spoken only of the historian and the scholar. But Irvine was much more. What he was in himself, how he thought, how he acted, I may perhaps relate elsewhere. Suffice it to say that it will be long before the same period of history will engage the attention of any scholar equally laborious and painstaking, or equally full, judicious, and accurate.

J. KENNEDY.

