



VI.—GEORGE TATE THE HISTORIAN OF ALNWICK.

By J. C. HODGSON.

[Read on the 28th November, 1917].

Although George Tate, the historian of Alnwick, occupies a niche in that treasury of Northumbrian biography provided by Mr. Richard Welford's *Men of Mark 'twixt Tyne and Tweed*,¹ his name seldom occurs in the publications of the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries. The reason is not far to seek; for the results of Mr. Tate's studies in history and archaeology—relating chiefly to the northern part of the county—were given to the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club, of which society he was an ideal secretary for thirteen years, whilst the fruits of his favourite studies in the science of geology, by their nature, were not admissible to *Archaeologia Aeliana*.

George Tate, eldest son of Ralph Tate of Alnwick, burgess and stone-mason,² was born at Alnwick on the 21st May, 1805, and received his name from his paternal grandfather. He received his education at the borough school, under Mr. George Dixon, 'a man of ability as a teacher,' but 'a severe and frequent flogger,' and at the grammar school under the Rev. William Procter, also perpetual curate of Alnwick, a 'faithful, fervent, and affectionate expositor of God's word,' 'an able classical teacher . . . what

¹ The following memoirs have been published:—'Memoir of the late George Tate, F.G.S.', by Robert Middlemas, *Hist. Berw. Nat. Club*, vol. vi, p. 269; 'George Tate, Historian of Alnwick,' Welford, *Men of Mark*, vol. III, p. 488; 'George Tate,' by Mrs. F. R. Wilson, *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. LV, p. 377.

Both Mr. Middlemas and Mrs. Wilson had the privilege of knowing Mr. Tate intimately.

² He was a skilled draftsman, and in 1812 made the drawing of Pottergate tower, reproduced in his son's *History of Alnwick*, vol. II, p. 288.

he taught, he taught well . . . carefully, it might be slowly, yet effectually grounding his pupils in the grammatical structure of language.' On leaving school he was apprenticed to Mr. Thomas Riddell, a linen draper, in the Market-place, and on the expiration of his apprenticeship set up in business on his own account in 1826 in Paikes lane, a short thoroughfare leading from Bondgate to the Market-place, of very ancient name and origin.

It was the year of the great contested election for knights of the shire from which, for long afterwards, old-fashioned people were wont to date events. In the by-election of that year Ralph Tate, the father, cast his vote for Mr. Matthew Bell, while the son, who had been admitted a free burgess, by patrimony, gave his to Mr. H. T. Liddell. At the general election, which followed four months afterwards, when both father and son voted in respect of freehold houses, the former split his vote between lord Howick and Mr. Bell, and the latter between lord Howick and Mr. Liddell.

In Parson and White's *Directory*, published in 1827, there appears under the heading of linen and woollen drapers 'Ralph Tate and Son, Peak lane.' Ralph Tate died on the 24th October of that year, aged 46: it is stated, from the result of an accident at the building of the Presbyterian chapel at Warkworth.

Either in the premises in which he originally set up, or in an adjoining house which stretches through into Fenkle street, to which it presents a front of mellowed red brick, three storeys in height—the only brick house in the street—and now numbered 14, George Tate resided until the year 1855. In that year he retired from business and then or subsequently transferred the post office—of which he had been appointed master in 1848—to the other side of Fenkle street to a house now known as number 25, next door but one to the old-established Star hotel.

Mr. Tate served his native town in the following offices:—

secretary of the Mechanics Institute from 1828 to 1859; and as a trustee of the same 24th June, 1831; postmaster from 6th March, 1848 to a fortnight before his death; member of the Board of Health from 1850 to his death; clerk of the Common Council from 1850 to 1858; president of the Scientific Club from 1869.

He was elected a member of the Berwickshire Naturalists Club in 1847, acted as president in 1853-1854, and served as an ardent and active secretary from 1858 down to the time of his death. He was also an ordinary or honorary member of the following learned societies:—the Geological Society; the Geological Society of Edinburgh; the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland; the Anthropological Society; Hastings Philosophical Society; and Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society.

During his long connexion with the Alnwick Mechanics and Scientific Institute, Mr. George Tate gave lectures on the following subjects:—

- On Geography, a course of lectures given in 1837.
- On the Formation of Dew, including an explanation of the Radiation of Heat and Condensation of Vapour, 5th March, 1840.
- On Mineralogy, a course of four lectures given in the months of January, February and March, 1841.
- On Crystallography, two lectures given in the month of March, 1841.
- On Extinct Organisms in Geology, 23rd February 1844.
- On the Succession of Life on the Globe, 27th January, 1847.
- On Volcanic Action, 7th February, 1849.
- On the Polished and Scratched Surface found in a limestone quarry near Ratcheugh Crag, 1849.
- On the causes of High Tides, and on the effects of the recent high tide on certain parts of the coast, 1st January, 1850.
- On the Structure, Distribution and Geological History of Cephalopods, 19th February, 1850.
- On the Natural History of Coal, 22nd February, 1853.
- On Sturgeons, 21st February, 1854.

On Cetaceae, with a description of a herd of porpoises which came ashore at Howick burn-mouth, 21st March, 1854.

On the Progress and Diffusion of Science during the [nineteenth] century viewed in connection with the moral and religious state of society, 13th March, 1855.

As early as 1850, if not earlier, Tate had conceived the project of writing a history of Alnwick. In that year he procured his election to be clerk of the Common Council in order to have unrestricted access to the borough records. The first volume of his history appeared in 1866, and the second two years later. The contents logically arranged in chapters, display considerable power of condensation of the copious material accumulated by the author, with literary skill and perspective in presenting his facts in an easy and readable narrative. The public could have found no more redoubtable champion of its claims and privileges, though it could be wished that the authorities, whence the information was obtained, had been more largely cited in the footnotes. The index does not do justice to this admirable work.

His townsmen and neighbours, justly proud of what Mr. Tate had done, in the spring of 1869 gave him a dinner, some silver plate and a purse of gold. They also presented an address on which they recorded their 'grateful appreciation of so valuable an accession to modern topographical literature—convinced that without courage, candour, and impartiality, the work would be comparatively worthless.' They testified their admiration of the prominent part he had taken in 'social and sanitary reform and in everything tending to improve the condition and promote the intellectual and moral advancement' of his fellow-townsmen. In acknowledging the compliments paid to him Mr. Tate disclosed that he had intended that his *opus magnum* should be the geology of Northumberland, but that, at his age, with infirm health, he could not hope to accomplish his intention and wish.

Two years later, on Wednesday, the 7th of June, 1871, after a full and well spent life, he rested from his labours.⁸

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⁸ Mr. Tate has been described, by one who knew him well, as 'slightly under the middle height, and of a fair complexion with greyish blue eyes.'

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⁴ Communicated by the late Mr. Robert Middlemas, *Hist. Berw. Nat. Club*, vol. vi, p. 280.