

CHARLES DAVIDSON BELL. By the Astronomer-Royal for  
Scotland.

Late and for long the Surveyor-General of our vast colony of the Cape of Good Hope, elected an Ordinary Fellow of this Society on March 4, 1878. Died here on the 7th of April 1882, aged 69.

Born at Newhall, in the parish of Crail, in the East Neuk of Fife, in 1813, in a family of three, and of so long lived a race that his mother lived to 85, his father attained to 90, his father's elder brother, General Sir John Bell, a leading officer of the Staff Corps in the Peninsular War, and highly approved of by the Duke of Wellington, reached the still nobler age of 95, and a grand-aunt lived to be 101, while his own brother and sister are still living, hale and hearty ;—it might therefore have been hoped, that when Charles D. Bell retired from southern official life to this country, in 1874, there were yet many years before him, wherein to exercise at leisure the many fine talents wherewith he was gifted, and in a manner to show forth something of the fervid love and even ecstatic devotion he always bore to his native land, notwithstanding his long separation from it.

But that was not to be. The trials and the stresses he had gone through in the South African climate and country were too many and too severe, however successfully they seemed to be overcome at the time. Success, indeed, usually crowned almost everything he undertook ; and he would have had a far more notable name among us had his career been confined to Old Scotland, instead of being spent so entirely as it was from his sixteenth to his sixty-first year in that new and greater Scotland which stretches now all across the globe, from Canada in the north-west to Australia and New Zealand in the south-east, with the Cape as a very central stronghold. Originally, no doubt, the Cape was a Dutch colony, but one wherein it was long ago remarked to me, that among the many British residents that had come flocking in, every one who got on best, whether in the higher or lower walks of life, was always a Scotchman. And one of the most noteworthy of those, because mainly by such original efforts and innate qualities of his own, was the subject of this notice.

Though leaving his country at so early an age (in 1829), Charles

D. Bell's preparations and prospects were good ; for he had attended classes at St. Andrews University, in fellow-studentship with John Goodsir (afterwards Professor of Anatomy in Edinburgh) and his brother Joseph, the minister. While at the Cape, his uncle, then Colonel Bell, private secretary to the Governor, and afterwards and for many years the sage and steady Colonial Secretary, was greatly interested in him.

After a period of service in the Secretary's office, C. D. Bell was transferred to that of the Master of the Supreme Court, and then to the Audit Office of the Colonial Government, becoming a favourite everywhere ; until it seemed as if his friends intended the young man for a future of nothing but quiet, resident, jog-trot official life in Cape Town itself, and no further. But in 1833, Sir (then plain Dr.) Andrew Smith (of the Army Medical Service) succeeded in organising an exploring expedition for penetrating into the interior of South Africa on a grander scale than anything hitherto attempted. Whereupon the internal fires of C. D. Bell's own spirit broke forth ; and, against the advice and even strenuous opposition of his legal guardians (for he was still under age), he would give up all his other prospects in order to seize this opportunity of penetrating into the great unknown. And though he *was* allowed to join the party at the last moment, it was only on condition of taking the lowest place in it.

An old friend, who well remembered meeting him just after he received his leave, has some years since described in print the wild enthusiasm with which C. D. Bell galloped through the streets of Cape Town to dash off preparations for the immediate start. He was a handsome-looking young fellow too ; not very tall, but broad-built and muscular, with a rather brown complexion, but regular features of refined and sculpturesque character, piercing black eyes, and dark lank hair.

The expedition, in spite of its numbers, was generally looked on as one of imminent danger. The latest previous expedition had been cut off to a man ; and no previous parties had ever returned without having undergone more or less perils of thirst, of hunger, of wild beasts, of lurking Bushmen with poisoned arrows, and whole tribes of more openly slaughtering foes. But away went this new expedition, striking straight across those stony tablelands of blinding

sunshine, roasting heat, and terrestrial drought, which fence in the Cape Colony along its northern and north-western frontiers almost as imperviously to all ordinary travellers as though they were walls of iron rising up to skies of brass, and intended to prevent inquirers from entering into the mysterious interior beyond, stretching away, as it was then supposed, uninterruptedly to the Equator itself.

A Kaffir war breaking out soon afterwards on the north-east frontier of the colony, the expedition was lost for a time to sight and hearing ; but after three years it returned safe, successfully too, on the whole, and with C. D. Bell raised by shere merit and proved capacity to be its second in command. But he had done far more than merely rule over others, and order their services ; for when the Association which had defrayed the expenses of the expedition held a public meeting in 1836 to exhibit its results (a meeting at which Sir John Herschel, then in the colony on astronomical research, presided, and gave a splendid address), every one was astonished, delighted, and instructed at finding the walls of the room decorated by nearly three hundred of C. D. Bell's drawings. He had been the artist of the expedition, and such an artist as showed him to possess a soul of true genius, if there be any one in the world of whom that can be properly said.

There, in those matchless drawings, was the peculiar country the expedition had passed through, in its minuter as well as larger features ; unadulterated, moreover, artistically by any methods of drawing taught at home on English trees and hedges and shady lanes ; for C. D. Bell had taught himself in South Africa on exactly what nature presented to him there. Hence was the great interior's physical geography, geology, and vegetation, too, where there was any, depicted again and again, either in brilliant colour, or *chiaro-scuro* force of black and white, and almost perfect truth of outline ; with the very atmosphere also before one to look into, as it shimmered and boiled in the vividness of solar light, and over stony surfaces heated up to 140° or 150° Fahr. ; but yet garnished with episodes of the wild animals of the region—generally gigantic mammals, of South Africa to-day, but of other parts of the earth only in some past geological age ; and with lifelike examples of the natives of every tribe whose lands the expedition had traversed, depicted in their most characteristic avocations. From little Bushmen securing

once in a way a mountain of meat, in a desert without water, by taking a two-horned rhinoceros in a pit-fall, to the Zulu regiments of King Moselikatse going forth with cow-hide shield and stabbing assegai to exterminate some neighbouring tribe ; or the poor of his kingdom, with famine girdles braced tightly round their loins, following in the track of lions, in hopes of partaking of some of their leavings : they were all on those faithful sheets of paper. While, so keen was C. D. Bell's appreciation of the ridiculous, that if there was any young fop among the nearly naked Bechuana or Malokolo, who wore his dress of a few jackals' tails and *some* glass beads with a particular twist of his own invention, and thought he looked so handsome in it that all the women must be falling in love with him, this native-born dandy was sure to figure in some one or other of Mr. Bell's drawings ; for he drew as much, or more, from memory in the silent watches of the night, as by sketching direct from nature through the day.

That that brilliant collection of pieces of graphical information never saw the light again until, after twenty years, a few of them straggled out to illustrate later travellers' books,—was no fault of Mr. Bell's. For he had necessarily to give them up to his chief ; and he, a very learned naturalist, and taken up far more with curiosities in the way of undescribed snakes,—was allowed by the Association to carry out a scheme of his own for obtaining renewed funds for more expeditions, by exhibiting all his natural history treasures in that focus of wealth and Government patronage, London ; but with a result which totally failed to pay its own expenses.

Meanwhile Mr. Bell quietly re-entered the Audit Office of the Colonial Government, where he was raised from his former junior position to be chief clerk ; and not long after that received the acting clerkship to the Legislative Council, holding that honourable position during a two years' absence of the proper officer.

But mere pen-work within four walls was not enough to satisfy C. D. Bell's aspirations, or assure his conscience that he was thereby turning to the utmost account all the varied talents committed to him by his Creator. In 1838, therefore, he began to turn his attention to surveying, and became soon after, one of the sworn land surveyors of the colony ;—a colony twice the size of Great Britain, but with a population of half the city of Edinburgh. A colony of

immense, craggy, rocky, mountain ranges (Le Vaillant termed one of them "the backbone of the earth"), and extensive desert plains, with a nice variation in the quality of their barrenness accordingly as they were of deep sand or ferruginous clay, mixed or unmixed with salt and gypsum. A colony, too, where the British element of population was still in utmost minority; and where the surveying system hitherto in vogue in the back, or over-berg, country had been—to let any Dutch boer, wanting land, choose some possible central water-hole in Government or unoccupied ground, and then ride round it on horseback for three hours, or drive round it on an ox-waggon for three days, according to its degree of want of vegetation; such interested boer undertaking to remember against all future comers what particular isolated bushes, or great rocks in the weary land, he had seen during such circumferential ride or drive, and had then and there chosen to be his baakens, or landmarks for ever afterwards.

As population increased, such a system was of course most fruitful in land disputes, and the then Surveyor-General, Colonel Mitchell, formerly of the Portuguese Legion in the Peninsular War, found his attempts to introduce accurate surveying into town lots grievously swamped by having presently the legal business of certain Landdrosts, Heemraden, and up-country Dutch Civil Commissioners, further thrust upon him, and his then sole assistant, Mr. Hertzog. He applied, therefore, in 1840, and obtained Mr. Bell's appointment as Second Assistant Surveyor-General; when he (C. D. Bell) was immediately sent off on a long and solitary travel, occupying several months (quite a geographical exploration in itself, in his little ox-cart, and attended only by a Malay driver and a Hottentot leader of the oxen), to the north-western corner of the colony, to settle disputed claims there; some of them on the cool Khamiesberg granite mountains 5000 and 6000 feet high, others in the hot and arid plains below, or the sandstone ranges and steppe formations further eastward and northward, even as far as to the Orange River below its falls. And he settled them so satisfactorily, and with so much calmness and wisdom, that the Dutch boers ever after that always addressed him, though still only twenty-seven years of age, by their title of highest honour, viz., "Old Mynheer Bell."

He was next appointed to organise a survey office in the eastern

district of the colony, where so many Scotch settlers were established under Pringle and others many years before, in what the Dutch had stigmatised as the "Zuureveld," or field where the grass was sour, and in their eyes, and to their means and resources, good for nothing, except to stick Englishmen in, to serve as buffer between them and the Kaffirs. From thence he was taken for a time by the new Governor of the colony, Sir Peregrine Maitland, to inspect the Kaffir frontier and interior districts. And again, in 1845, across the upper Orange River to Zwartkopjies, "where," says a local print, "the information he had acquired in the expedition of 1833 was found extremely useful." No doubt it was, too, and yet not sufficiently utilised by the Government at home; for had it been, several calamitous disasters of recent years, and excitations of international hatred in the north-east of that country, would have been avoided. The distribution, too, of the British settlers would have been arranged in a manner to profit far more by the physical geography of South Africa; which offers a Brazilian climate on one side against an Arabia Deserta on the other, if you only go far enough in either direction from the intermediate point of Table Mountain and Table Bay, where the Dutch first landed, and for so long looked upon it as their only and commanding centre for their agriculture, commerce, and government in all the southern hemisphere.

In 1848 Mr. Bell became, on the demise of Colonel Mitchell (a demise much lamented, and hastened in no small degree by the extra anxieties of his office), full Surveyor-General of the Cape of Good Hope. Thenceforward, for twenty-six years, he ruled in that department with a suavity, firmness, and knowledge that obtained the best possible results for Government, out of an otherwise almost hopeless, tangled collection of conflicting interests, old legislations, and changed ideas. His thorough knowledge of the colony in which he had grown up to man's estate, his mature development of a judicial breadth of view, combined with his scientific skill and mechanical abilities, were evidently becoming more and more appreciated; for, spite of the over-work of his own office, he was so frequently requested to join divers Government committees, and prepare special reports, such as that on the establishment for convicts, lepers, and lunatics on Robben Island, the newly-found copper fields of Little Namaqua land: and various lines of road to open up

hitherto untrodden districts : until at last, such extra demands of the upper colonial officials culminated in this,—that whereas they had quarrelled with and dismissed their recently imported English engineer-in-chief for a proposed line of Metropolitan Railway, extending from Cape Town to the Berg River Valley, and some one must be found to take his place, they unanimously agreed that C. D. Bell was that man ; because he was the only one amongst them who could lay out railway curves, build bridges, raise embankments, bore tunnels, inspect locomotives, and, in a word, save them, the great officials of the new “responsible Government,” so called, in the eyes of the people, and before public opinion.

And he did help them through that great difficulty by extraordinary exertions of his own, and which he could hardly have accomplished at his then advanced age, but that he had never spared himself. He had lived a triple life all along ; first, his official life, whose duties were always paramount with him ; second, his private social life, where he was always a favourite ; and lastly, his artistic life, which occupied almost every other moment of his existence.

In 1846, while still in Cape Town, by shere dint of his knowledge of the eastern country and people, he produced a long series of drawings in black and white, representing events in the Kaffir war then raging under Sir Peregrine Maitland,—drawings which astonished and delighted the soldiers who had been engaged in the operations,—and, being sent home, were taken on one occasion by the Duke of Wellington into his private study, to con over alone, before giving his opinion on the conduct of that war to the House of Lords.

In 1847, having come home on a short leave of absence, Mr. Bell procured from Messrs. Schenck & Co. of this city, a lithographic press and stones, learned to work it himself, threw off at once a number of South African subjects, varying from the Rev. Mr. Moffat preaching to Bechuanas, down to Amakosa Kaffirs torturing a wounded prisoner ; and took the whole plant out with him to Cape Town, a novel and important accession at that time to its means of graphic multiplication.

There he further worked at oil painting ; and when the community at last began to awake to the importance of art culture, and opened an exhibition of pictures, he carried off their gold medal for

a spirited historical painting, representing Van Riebeck founding the Cape Colony in 1650.

Wood carving next came in for attention during some of C. D. Bell's spare hours; also modelling in clay; such models, after baking in an oven, being then painted in natural colours. For the object of most of these artistic works "in the round" was to preserve the physiognomy, manners, customs, tastes, and traditions of the native races of South Africa. He had enjoyed the opportunity of seeing those races on his first arrival in their country, still numerous, distinctive, and true in their stationary savagedom to a long past antiquity; but before he left, they were rapidly losing, under new conditions, those characteristic features, as well as their ancient, imperfect mother tongues.

Such then was the man, Charles D. Bell, who, leaving most of those precious works behind him, or having given them away right and left too generously as soon as completed, returned to this country in 1874, with his second wife (a Cape lady), two sons, and a daughter. Giving vent immediately to his long pent-up passionate admiration for his native land, he soon joined the Antiquaries and the Meteorological Societies, as well as our own; wrote on the ancient harps of Scotland, and began to illustrate in painting some of the touching ballads of the country's former days. But his existence was saddened by the quickly following deaths of mother, father, and uncle. Then he suddenly lost the use of one eye. Without external change, or internal feel, the sight power was gone. He had always been very short of sight, however keen; and it was that eye, whose surrounding muscular contractions had enabled him to keep a strong concave lens always in place through fifty years of excellent work, which had now suddenly broken down.

But most of all was he affected by the sudden and totally unexpected demise at Crail, during a summer residence there last year, in his father's old house, of his beloved Wife. His faithful spirit never recovered that blow, and he but lingered on for some six months further, until he followed her himself.

I cannot expect that, with my imperfect knowledge of his most multifarious life, I have in any way succeeded in representing it as it so fully deserves to be represented, in all its noble character and just proportions. Nor is there, perhaps, the most pressing of all

necessities that I should do so before the present audience ; for it is not we, but the Cape people who should erect a statue to him : to him, Charles D. Bell, who did, and accomplished, and suffered so much for them and amongst them, through all the best years of his long period of a most hard-working life and publicly useful career.

C. P. S.

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WILLIAM ROBERTSON, M.D. By George Seton, Esq.,  
Advocate.

Dr. William Robertson was born in Edinburgh on the 8th of January 1818. He was the eldest son of Mr. George Robertson, Keeper of the Records in H.M. General Register House, by Eliza Brown, his wife, sister to General Sir George Brown, of Crimean fame, and Mr. Peter Brown, well known as an agriculturist and land valuator in the north of Scotland. He obtained his early education at the Edinburgh Academy, from which he passed to the University ; and, after completing the medical curriculum, he continued his studies at Paris, Berlin, and Vienna. In 1839 he graduated M.D. of Edinburgh, his Thesis being on Enlargement of the Heart, which proved to be the disease from which he suffered prior to his death. Four years afterwards he was admitted a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians. He acted for some time as a physician in the Royal Infirmary, the Fever and Cholera Hospitals, and the New Town Dispensary ; and, holding the appointment of Inspector-Physician of the British Civil Hospital at Renkioi, in virtue of the recommendation of Sir Robert Christison, he served as a physician during the Crimean war. He was at one time editor of the *Edinburgh Monthly Journal of Medical Science*, to which he contributed several papers. On the resignation of Dr. Stark, in 1874, he was appointed to the post of Superintendent of the Statistical Department in the General Registry Office of Births, Deaths, and Marriages, having previously acted as Medical Registrar for Scotland. One of his latest official works was the preparation of the Report prefixed to the first volume relative to the Scottish Census of 1881. In 1876, on the death of Dr. Warburton Begbie, he became medical officer to the Scottish Widows' Fund, having by that time gained large experience in matters connected with Life