

Sir J. Arthur Thomson, M.A., LL.D.

ON February 12, 1933, within two years of his retiral from the Chair of Natural History at the University of Aberdeen, where he had taught with great effect for thirty-one years, J. Arthur Thomson succumbed to a heart illness at his home at Limpsfield, Surrey. He will be most widely remembered for the success of his endeavours to bring scientific knowledge home to the plain man, but his zoological investigations and philosophical essays bear witness besides to much activity in the cause of knowledge for itself.

Born in 1861 at Saltoun in East Lothian, Thomson graduated M.A. at the University of Edinburgh in 1880. A son and grandson of the manse, he aimed at the ministry and completed the divinity course at New College; but the pull of heredity (his grandfather was Dr David Landsborough of the little books on seaweed and zoophytes), and the influence of his teachers, Alleyne Nicholson, Dickson, Cossar Ewart, Geikie, Rutherford, and others, determined his course towards the study of Nature. His post-graduate experience was wide: in 1883-4 he was working in Ernst Haeckel's zoological laboratory at Jena, in 1884 he moved on to Professor Delage's marine laboratory at Caen, and in 1885 he was concentrating upon the histology of sponges in F. Eilhard Schultze's laboratory in Berlin.

On his return to Edinburgh in 1886 he began the teaching career which was to place many generations of students of biology deeply in his debt. Following upon a variety of lecture courses in Edinburgh and occasional experience as substitute for Professor Haddon in Dublin, Professor Prince in Glasgow, and Professor Henry Drummond in Glasgow Free Church College, in 1899 he was appointed by the then Secretary for Scotland, Lord Balfour of Burleigh, to the Regius Chair of Natural History at the University of Aberdeen, left vacant through the death of Henry Alleyne Nicholson. He taught with clearness, sympathy, and imagination, and one of the indications of his success is the presence of his pupils in many important zoological posts.

Even during the stress of his extraordinary teaching activity, Thomson kept in close touch with scientific developments. For many years he contributed an annual section to the *Zoological Record*, and was responsible for the zoological extracts in the *Journal of the Royal Microscopical*

Society. With the greater opportunities at Aberdeen, he turned to the investigation of the coral-like Alcyonaria, and contributed a large number of systematic papers on collections of the group from all parts of the world, notable among them being memoirs on the collections of the Australian *Thetis* Expedition, on the Prince of Monaco's collections, and on those of the Dutch *Siboga* Expedition to the East Indies.

There can be no doubt, however, that Sir Arthur Thomson gained recognition most widely as a writer of books. The quantity and the variety of his written work was enormous. Some of his books, like *The Evolution of Sex* (1889), written with the late Sir Patrick Geddes, made a lasting impression upon scientific thought; others, like *The Science of Life* (1899), *Heredity* (1908), and *The System of Animate Nature* (St Andrews Gifford Lectures of 1920), classified and systematised aspects of scientific progress or modern concepts of life; while his last great work, also written with Geddes, *Life: Outlines of General Biology* (1931), is a rich storehouse of facts bearing upon a very wide variety of biological themes. Besides this more austere aspect of his writing, Thomson had the art, rare and not easily acquired, of expressing scientific truths in language simple, clear, and beautiful, so that the plain man could understand and appreciate. He became more and more an evangelist proclaiming to the people the gospel of the interest and beauty and wonder of living things.

In 1887, when he was appointed Lecturer in the School of Medicine in Edinburgh, Thomson became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and during two terms (1906–8 and 1920–23) he served on the Council. He was an LL.D. of his own University of Edinburgh, as well as of the Universities of McGill and California, and in 1930, upon his retirement from the Chair of Natural History in Aberdeen University, a Knighthood was conferred upon him. Sir J. Arthur Thomson is survived by Lady Thomson, who shared in his labours and achievements, and by a family of three sons and one daughter, all of whom have written books of value on different aspects of biological science.

J. R.