

J. NORMAN COLLIE

*Portrait by Nowell*

## JOHN NORMAN COLLIE.

HUGH D. WELSH.

By the death of John Norman Collie, LL.D., F.R.S., on November 1, 1942, mountaineering lost one of its most outstanding figures and the Club its Honorary President. To the great majority of members he was little more than a name, and there are very few of them who had actually come in contact with him.

Born at Alderley Edge, Manchester, on September 10, 1859, and receiving his education at Charterhouse and Clifton College, he always considered himself a Scot, for his father, John Collie, was the son of a George Collie who was tenant of the farm of Wantonwells, near Insch in Aberdeenshire. In his early years the family came to live for a time at Glassel on Deeside, before taking up permanent residence near Bristol.

From 1877 he studied chemistry under Professor Letts at Bristol, and later on in Wurzburg in Germany, obtaining the Ph.D. in 1884. As a chemist and teacher he made rapid advances and was the holder of several distinguished appointments. In 1885 he was lecturer in Chemistry at the Ladies' College, Cheltenham, and two years later acted as assistant to Sir William Ramsay at University College, London. While there he showed outstanding ability as a teacher, and in 1896 was appointed to the Chair of Chemistry at the Pharmaceutical College, London. In 1902 he returned to University College as Professor of Organic Chemistry under Sir William Ramsay, and when his chief retired in 1913 he became Director of the Chemical Laboratories until his retirement in 1928. It is to Collie, with his inspiration, enthusiasm, and versatility, his success as a teacher and researcher in organic chemistry, that University College owes its eminence, and there are many scientists of high distinction whose early steps to success were influenced by

the inspiration received from him. The Universities of Glasgow and St Andrews honoured him with the degree of LL.D., and Belfast and Liverpool Universities conferred the degree of D.Sc. upon him. In 1896 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society.

But in a Club such as ours it is not as a chemist we think of him, but as a mountaineer and explorer, and a sincere lover of the hills. At the age of eight, in 1867, he climbed his first mountain, the Hill of Fare. Even at this early age he was greatly affected by the beauty of his surroundings, and the details of that memorable day were vivid to him all his life. As a youth and young man he did little or no climbing, but spent his vacations fishing in the Western Highlands. In the early eighties he got his first glimpse of the Cuillin in Skye from Wester Ross and learned there was good fishing in some of the rivers there. With a brother he crossed to Skye in 1886, but lack of water made fishing unprofitable, so they spent a good deal of their time bathing in the sea lochs. As a result of being badly stung by jellyfish in Loch Sligachan he gave up sea-bathing, and, as he said, "took to bad habits"; he began to climb! The Cuillin, with its mystical brooding charm, greatly attracted him and captured his heart. From that time he felt he had to give of his best in revealing the hidden secrets of the recesses of that then comparatively little known paradise of climbers. During his first visit he made two unsuccessful attempts to scale Sgùrr nan Gillean, but a third, suggested by John Mackenzie, the guide, by what is now known as the Tourist Route, gave him great delight. Skye now had him in thrall, and by 1888 he had ascended all the peaks, and in subsequent years opened up new routes on what had been hitherto considered inaccessible faces. The first route up the terrifying Bhasteir Tooth was discovered by him in 1889. Another, considered even yet as one of difficulty, is the climb to A' Chioch on Sròn na Ciche which he discovered accidentally in 1906. He was coming down Coire Lagan after a day on Sgùrr Sgumain and saw a peculiar shadow cast on the face of Sròn na Ciche. Investigation led to the discovery of the remarkable A' Chioch pinnacle, and Collie,

with John Mackenzie, worked out the first ascent and descent. His climbs on the fascinating faces and pinnacles of the Cuillin make a long list and would take up too much space to enumerate, but descriptive details are to be found in articles in the *Journals* of the Scottish Mountaineering Club and the Alpine Club. In recognition of his achievements as a climber and pioneer in Skye, one of the peaks, Sgùrr Thormaid (Norman's Peak), was named after him.

Ben Nevis attracted him, and he spent some seasons there with Solly, Haskett-Smith, Slingsby, and others. The West Highlands and the Cairngorms saw comparatively little of him, and a curious thing is that he had never been at Loch Avon or the Shelter Stone.

In 1891 he joined the Scottish Mountaineering Club, served on the Committee from 1898 to 1900, and was elected an Honorary Member in 1938. The Alpine Club added him to its membership in 1893, and in 1896 he acted on the Committee. In 1910 he became Vice-President, and President in 1920. In 1923 he succeeded Sir Francis Younghusband as Chairman of the Mount Everest Committee. In recognition of his exploratory and climbing achievements he was elected Vice-President of the Royal Geographical Society (1924-28). In 1922 our Club elected him Honorary President in succession to Viscount Bryce, and during his twenty years' association with us he was always keenly interested in its activities.

For several years from 1893 Collie visited the Alps with Mummery, Slingsby, Hastings, and Bruce, making numerous climbs of extreme severity under difficult conditions. Here, although the climbs rank high in the scale of difficulty, Collie on several occasions asserted their inferiority to climbs in Skye and Ben Nevis. In 1895 he went to India with Mummery, Hastings, and Bruce and made several attempts on Nanga Parbat (26,628 feet), but conditions were against them and the highest point reached was about 21,000 feet. Mummery, with two Gurkhas, failed to return from a last attempt, and the loss of this close friend affected Collie deeply, and it was with great difficulty that one could get him to speak about it.

Between 1897 and 1910 he climbed and explored extensively in the Canadian Rockies with Dixon, Stutfield, and Woolley. Mounts Lefroy, Victoria, Gordon, and Freshfield fell to him in 1897, and the following year he went in search of Mounts Brown and Hooker, discovered the Columbia Group and the Columbia Icefield of 110 square miles in extent, and made first ascents of Mount Athabasca and Diadem Peak. In 1901 he visited the Lofoten Islands off the north coast of Norway, for he had heard rumours that they were more beautiful than Skye and the Cuillin. Here was climbing after his own heart, and he admitted it was difficult. For two or three seasons he climbed in this mountaineers' paradise. Two of the highest peaks, Higrav Tind and Gjeitgalfar were virgin, but Collie, with Woolley, Hastings, and Priestman, after great efforts, built cairns on their summits.

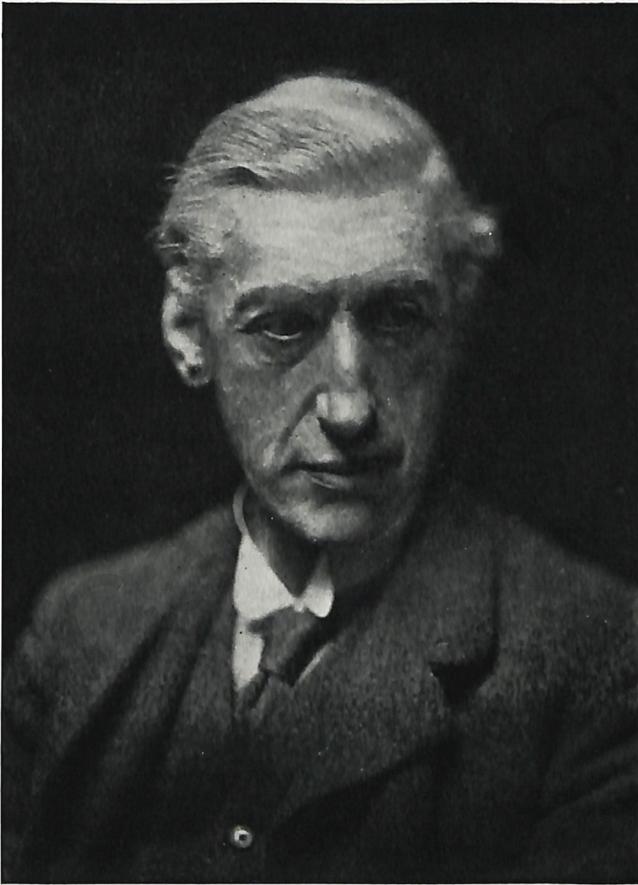
His published articles on climbing bear the hall-mark of appreciation of the subject and the necessity for accuracy and lucidity. The pages of the *Journals* of the Alpine Club, the Scottish Mountaineering Club, and the Cairngorm Club contain numerous contributions from his pen which are a pleasure to read, if only for finished style. He wrote somewhat unwillingly, but when he did write, put his heart into it. I remember him expressing his detestation of articles on climbs where distances and times are set out in detail "like a railway timetable." Beauty of form, line, or colour appealed to him strongly, especially in those places where most people would see nothing but savage desolation. He deplored the seeming inability of the majority of climbers to appreciate the wondrous handiwork of the Creator under their hands and all around them. In our own *Journal* his "Dreams" in 1932 and "Independence" in 1939 are descriptive of his intense love and appreciation of the High Places, and give us an insight to his sincerity where mountains are concerned. His "Climbing in the Himalaya and other Mountain Ranges," published in 1902, is a literary gem, and "Climbs and Exploration in the Canadian Rockies," jointly with H. E. M. Stutfield in 1903, is a valuable contribution to the literature of that region. Inspired by his

close friend and companion, Colin B. Phillip, R.S.W., he achieved some eminence as a painter in water-colours, and by this medium was able to give some expression to his sense of beauty. Most of his pictures were done from memory, and it has been my good fortune to see many of them in the seclusion of his room at Sligachan. One in particular is remarkable for its accuracy of outline, having been done after a lapse of over fifty years—an impression of the Cairngorms from near the watershed of the Tilt and the Geldie. As a photographer he excelled, and he chose his subjects with infinite patience and understanding. His early photographs in colour, on plates of German make, are masterpieces. He was a recognised expert on Chinese porcelain, lacquers, bronzes, and works of art, and possessed a valuable collection which was drawn upon for exhibitions of importance.

Shy and reserved with strangers and difficult of approach, Dr Collie on closer acquaintance became one of the most interesting and delightful of men. There were few subjects on which he could not talk easily and with great knowledge and authority, but perhaps climbing in his beloved hills was his favourite subject. He had a photographic memory, and could describe in minute detail every hand and foot hold of climbs done many years before. He did not talk freely until he came to know and like you; then his conversation was intimate and full of delight. From the time of my first contact with him in 1934 at Sligachan it was my good fortune to be regarded as one of his friends, and I shall always have exceedingly pleasant recollections of my association with him. My first impression of him was that of a solitary, unfriendly man living in a world of memories. But by degrees he unbent and I was admitted to the small circle of his close friends who came to Sligachan. For many years he came to Sligachan in the early spring and remained there till the late autumn, fishing in the rivers and the Storr Lochs and shooting in Glen Brittle, where for some years he rented the Lodge, and living over again his early days on the Cuillin peaks. For Skye was home to him, and his love for it was deep and everlasting. His favourite chair in the outer vestibule was known as "Collie's Corner," and

woe betide anyone who presumed to occupy it! From there he could look out upon Glamaig and the Red Hills and down Loch Sligachan to Raasay, and envelop himself in a cloud of tobacco smoke and memories. I often wondered what he thought about as he gazed out with far-regarding, listening eyes. Sometimes when spoken to he seemed to return from a great distance, as if he had been living over again some of his early exploits. He was intolerant of strangers, and as a result was thought rude and unfriendly. On one occasion he and I were sitting together in the vestibule one drenching morning when two ladies approached, clad in oilskins and sou'westers and armed with umbrellas. To their query, "Oh, Doctor, what kind of day will it be?" he gave no answer, but gazed out through the streaming window. A second venture was responded to by his withdrawing his pipe and, without taking his gaze away, replying, "Can't you use your eyes?" The ladies hastily departed. But he was at his best after dinner with his audience of a select few, for then his conversation was sparkling and memorable no matter what was the subject. But whenever strangers appeared he drew into himself, and retired either to his own room or that of Mr Campbell's, where we later on joined him to continue our enjoyment. From him I learned many things about his early days at Glassel and his introduction to Skye, and of his experience on Ben Macdhuì when he heard the footsteps of the Ferla Mhor. Skye was in his blood, for most of his talk to me was about his Cuillin climbs with John Mackenzie. John was more than a friend to him; one would almost think he was his other self, and his death was a blow from which he never seemed to fully recover. The Doctor, as he was affectionately called, was always interested in what I proposed doing each day, and I profited greatly by his advice and suggestions, for his knowledge of weather conditions was uncanny. On my return he invariably asked how the day went and what I had done and seen, and I was led to understand from others that this interest was not given to many and that I was fortunate in securing it.

Though he did not take an active part in the Club's affairs he was, nevertheless, keenly interested in its activities, and



J. NORMAN COLLIE

the receipt of the *Journal* always gave him great pleasure. He did not praise readily, but he was sincere in his praise of our *Journal*, and passed it round a select few at Sligachan. When I sounded him in 1936 as to the possibility of his attending the proposed excursion in June 1937 to the Shelter Stone, the scene of the foundation of the Club, to celebrate fifty years of existence, he showed great animation, especially when I suggested the securing of a pony for his use. However, he said he was too old for that kind of thing, and he would have to be sure of good weather. Such was his interest that soon after the excursion he wrote me asking about it, and later that year, when I was at Sligachan in September, one of the first things he asked about was an account of the visit. Again in 1938 when I suggested he might be able to attend as an honoured guest the Jubilee Dinner of the Club in November his eyes lit up and he was enthusiastic about the idea. Later on he wrote to say he was coming, and although he was in his eightieth year he made the long journey from London to be with us. That gesture showed the interest he had in us.

My last personal contact with him was at Sligachan just after the outbreak of war in September 1939. The hotel had been full, but by the beginning of the month only about half a dozen visitors were left. Dr Collie had come there as usual in the early spring, and was very worried about his house and belongings in London. He foretold a long and bitter struggle not only in Europe but spread over the whole world, and became somewhat depressed. On that occasion I saw a great deal of him, but was struck by his "far-away-ness," though he never lost interest in my doings. Since that time he corresponded with me from time to time, commenting on the ever-wonderful pageant of colour on the moors and peaks. The plight of the crofters in bad seasons distressed him greatly and his enforced exile, even to Skye, told upon him. In 1941 when I wrote on the occasion of his birthday he remarked that he was getting old and would not live to see the liberation of the world from the "foul beast of Europe." The death of his friend and host, John Campbell, at

Sligachan in the early part of that year was a grievous blow, and an accident in the autumn while fishing in the Storr Loch, when he fell in and got a thorough wetting, left him in a precarious state, and he never really regained strength. When I heard of his rapidly failing health in the summer of 1942 I tried in vain to obtain a permit from the military authorities to visit him in Skye. He was alone in the hotel but for an occasional visit from well-loved friends from Drynoch. It is good to know, however, that a friend of long standing, Mr G. H. Lee, was able to be with him at the end, which was peaceful. During his last few days his thoughts were again with his faithful John Mackenzie, and on November 1 slipped away with him into the mists of the Other Side. As was fitting, he was laid to rest beside him at Struan.

Dr Collie had a rooted objection to being photographed and I have never been able to secure one of him although I made several attempts. The portrait accompanying this note is a reproduction of what I understand is the only studio portrait in existence. The portrait is in the possession of Dr Masson, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sheffield, who lent it to the Royal Society for reproduction, and through the courtesy of the Council of the Royal Society I received a copy for our *Journal*. The frontispiece is from a reproduction in the possession of Dr Collie's old friend, Mr G. H. Lee, of an oil painting by Nowell. It is a difficult matter to secure a good photographic reproduction of a portrait in oils, but this one of Dr Collie is an excellent likeness and depicts him in a characteristic attitude. We are very grateful to the Council of the Royal Society and to Mr Lee for the opportunity to record these likenesses of a great personality in our *Journal*.

In a letter in which Professor Collie suggested certain corrections and additions to "Dreams" he wrote, "I don't think I have ever written anything better." The article, which first appeared in Vol. XIII., p. 59, of the *Journal* (1932), is reprinted here, with these changes incorporated, at the request of several members who do not have the original.