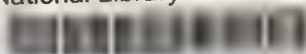


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17.

THE SPOLIATION OF THE HUNTERIAN
MUSEUM

A LETTER

BY

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NOTE.

THE following statement appeared as a letter in the Glasgow newspapers of yesterday. I have added a paragraph as to the supposed discretionary nature of the power in question.

D. M.

169 WEST GEORGE STREET,
GLASGOW,
23rd December, 1892.

SPOLIATION OF THE HUNTERIAN MUSEUM.

THE Glasgow newspapers of 20th December contain one of the most startling announcements which has appeared for a long time. I refer to Draft Ordinance, Glasgow, No. 4, of the Scottish Universities Commissioners, which provides that the University Court of the University of Glasgow shall have power to sell the coins comprised in the Hunterian collection of coins, or any part thereof. How this Ordinance came to be drafted, who suggested it, or what evidence the Commissioners had before them, is not explained. Presumably the suggestion must have come from the University Court, and, if so, one is curious to know by whom it was considered, and of what nature the representation was by which it was supported. That the Commissioners should draft such an Ordinance is almost incredible; but there it is, and I now write to draw attention to it, and to urge everyone interested in education, history, art, and archæology to oppose it to the uttermost.

Dr. William Hunter was a Lanarkshire man, a Glasgow student and graduate, a distinguished London surgeon, and one of the foremost teachers of his time of anatomy and cognate subjects. His museum was one of the most splendid ever formed by a private individual, having cost him not less than £60,000; and on his death in 1783 he bequeathed the whole, together with the sum of £8,000 for erecting a building to contain it, to the Principal and Faculty of the College of Glasgow, “to be kept and preserved by
 “them and their successors for ever to and for the use
 “of the said Principal and Faculty of the College of
 “Glasgow . . . in such sort, way, manner, and
 “form as to the said Principal and Faculty of the
 “College of Glasgow and their successors for the time
 “being shall seem most fit and most conducive to the
 “improvement of the students of the said University
 “of Glasgow.”

The most valuable portion of the museum is the collection of coins and medals. “This grand assemblage of numismatic rarities,” says Captain Laskey in his “Account of the Hunterian Museum,” “was
 “acquired by the most persevering industry and
 “unbounded liberality of expense, and surpasses that
 “of every other cabinet now (1813) in existence, that
 “formed by the Kings of France during a succession
 “of reigns excepted. The latter, before the formation
 “of Dr. Hunter’s, was without a rival, but in many

“ respects it is now confessedly inferior. Even the
 “ British Museum, that great national treasure, gives
 “ way in this department to the cabinet of Dr. Hunter.
 “ Before the removal of the cabinet from London to
 “ Glasgow, the trustees of the great national concern
 “ offered the College of Glasgow the immense sum of
 “ £20,000 sterling for the divisions of the first and
 “ second series alone, and to return all the duplicates,
 “ together with casts from the originals of those that
 “ were kept.”

Nothing of importance has been added to this part of the collection for more than a hundred years, while other collections have been increased enormously during that period, so that it is now surpassed by several; but this in no way detracts from its great and intrinsic excellence as a cabinet of medals and coins.

This is the collection which it is now proposed to sell. Whether the Commissioners have power to authorise the sale is questionable, but this may be passed by at present.

Of the immense value of a well-arranged and extensive collection of coins as an adjunct to the study of history and archæology, and the arts of design, it is almost unnecessary to speak. The expenditure of large sums of money on the numismatic departments of every great museum is sufficient evidence of it. Year by year the study of numismatics is extending,

and is being brought more into use in confirming and correcting the statements of ancient authors, in illustrating manners and customs, and in tracing the development of art. Hardly a volume of importance dealing with history or archæology but is illustrated from the coin-room. Not many years ago Sir John Evans reconstructed the whole early history of Britain from the coins of her kings, many of the best examples of which he obtained in the Hunterian Museum ; and nearly every numismatic work of importance is indebted to the same collection.

The great Italian medallists are well represented in this collection, and without a reference to them it is impossible properly to understand the history of Italian art.

“ The medal, faithful to its charge of fame,
Thro’ climes and ages bears each form and name :
In one short view subjected to our eye
Gods, emp’rors, heroes, sages, beauties lie.”

It is, no doubt, proposed to direct that the proceeds of the coins and medals are to be applied to the maintenance or extension (1) of the Hunterian Museum and Library, or (2) of other libraries and museums belonging to the University. The plain meaning of this, however, is that the University Library being short of funds, the money is to be got by sacrificing the contents of the medal-room,

for it is quite certain that nothing would ever be applied towards the Hunterian Library or the other parts of that museum. The proposal is just as reasonable as to sell all the rare and curious printed books and manuscripts in the library to buy current text books and yellow backs, or to sell the natural history specimens to improve the gymnasium.

The University Library requires additional funds, but these must not be obtained by the sacrifice of the crowning glory of the University. It is to be hoped that the trustees of the Bellahouston Trust will give a substantial sum for the library, and whatever may still be wanting should be supplied by the Treasury. The proposed Ordinance by the Commissioners is just a roundabout way of saving a grant from Exchequer. A few years ago £70,000 was paid for one picture for the National Gallery. Surely half this sum can be given to save this noble collection.

The public, I know, take little interest in the coins or in the museum, but they are not to blame. The museum is practically closed so far as they are concerned. The learned curator is only too glad to show his treasures to all interested, but neither he nor the University is in a position to throw it open to the public as it ought to be, as a considerable staff of attendants would be required; but if funds for this were provided, and

for adding to the collections, there would be no more popular place in Glasgow than the Hunterian Museum.

The University Commissioners of 1830 endeavoured to do something to popularise the museum. It was suggested to them that the College ought to grant free admittance as at the British Museum, and similar establishments in other countries. This was all in the right direction, but without attendants the museum could not be thrown open, and attendants cannot be provided without money to pay their salaries.

Glasgow has never been wanting in helping on a good object, and now, when there is so great a demand for museums and object-teaching, it is to be hoped that an earnest endeavour will be made to provide a fund for opening this noble museum and supplementing its collections.

By another Draft Ordinance the Commissioners propose to found a Chair of History in the University, but the incongruity of establishing a Chair of History and at the same time destroying one of the most important aids to the study of history need only be mentioned.

The late Professor William Ramsay gave several most interesting courses of lectures upon the Greek and Roman coins in the Hunterian collection; and his valuable Manual of Roman Antiquities is in-

debted for many of its instructive illustrations to that great storehouse of antiquity.

It need scarcely be pointed out that such an abuse of authority as is contemplated in the Ordinance in question would be a serious check to the prosperity of all museums, libraries, and kindred institutions. No man who has spent his life and fortune in forming a collection to illustrate a subject in which he is interested would bequeath it to an institution, if it was liable to be converted into money and the proceeds applied to some more utilitarian object. It is an absolute bar to the endowment of research.

It may be suggested that the exercise of the power of sale proposed to be granted in the Draft Ordinance is discretionary not imperative, and therefore that it may never be exercised. Nothing could be more delusive. If the power be once conferred upon the University Court it would certainly be exercised, and at no distant date. The Court would find itself helpless in the matter, and it could not be restrained in the exercise of the power.

The power has been asked for, and is proposed to be granted, not as ancillary to the working out of a trust or the administration of an estate, but for the purpose of setting aside the conditions under which Dr. Hunter's gift is held and for defeating his intentions.

The promoters of the Ordinance have probably a definite object in view, and, if so, it should be stated.

I am well aware that technical museums are wanted in several departments of the University. To endow them out of Dr. Hunter's bequest would be so flagrant a breach of trust that it could never be obtained on an application to Parliament with this avowed object. If, however, the power in question is conferred upon the University Court, this endowment will be the inevitable result if the proposal is made. If such a demand was made and urged, sooner or later the Court would be forced to sanction such museums, and the sale of Dr. Hunter's coins and medals would follow.

The mere existence of the power of sale would be a temptation to everyone interested to press for its exercise, and the argument, that having been granted it was intended to be used, would be irresistible.

Dr. Hunter's gift can only be protected by stopping the Ordinance.



