Obituary

SIR J. ARTHUR THOMSON

WITHIN two years of his retirement from the chair of natural history at the University of Aberdeen, Sir J. Arthur Thomson was struck down by a heart illness which had hampered his well-being for many years, and although he rallied, his power of resistance was broken and he died at his home at Limpsfield in Surrey on February 12, aged seventy-one years.

Born at Saltoun, East Lothian, on July 8, 1861, a son and grandson of the manse, Thomson graduated M.A. at the University of Edinburgh in 1880, and thereafter completed the divinity course at New College. But the influence of his teachers, and a natural bent derived from two generations of naturalists on his mother's side, swung the balance towards the study of natural science, and in 1883 he was at Jena under the guidance of Ernst Haeckel, and in 1885 with Schulze at the Zoological Institute in Berlin. He returned to Edinburgh to become the most popular teacher of his time in zoology and botany, and his success there led to his appointment in 1899 to the regius chair of natural history at Aberdeen. He was a good teacher, clear and sympathetic, never losing sight of the wood for the trees, insistent upon the broad truths to which the facts pointed; and so during these thirty-one years he kept turning out a stream of scientific workers remarkable in its volume for a small university recruited from schools where biology is unknown.

At the same time, Thomson was constantly engaged upon systematic investigations of the Alcyonaria, collections of which came to him for identification from almost all the seas of the world. The majority of his papers upon these collections were included in the reports of special expeditions, so that the mass of his descriptive work has been scarcely recognised; but although it was perhaps the least important of his great activities, it was very far from being negligible, as is witnessed by the extent of the collection of type and named specimens he presented to the British Museum on his retirement, and by the excellence of such memoirs as his accounts of the Alcyonaria of the Australian *Thetis* Expedition, of the Prince of Monaco's collection, and of the Dutch *Siboga* Expedition to the East Indies, the last of which appeared not many months ago.

Apart from his teaching, Thomson's great achievement was undoubtedly as an expositor of science and scientific thought. He had a gift of simple, lucid writing and lecturing, which enabled him from his full knowledge to expound the beauty and interest of Nature, so that no man of his time has done so much to interest the people in natural history. That was a work of importance, paving the way for that appreciation of scientific work which will allot to it its proper place in the life and progress of civilisation. He was in demand at home and abroad as a lecturer, and his lectures in book form, together with his other writings, make a considerable library in themselves. They were by no means all of the popular sort, and amongst the best I should be inclined to place "The Evolution of Sex" (1889) written with Patrick Geddes, "The Science of Life" (1899), a neat summary of biological progress, "The Wonder of Life" (1914), the St. Andrews Gifford lectures "The System of Animate Nature" (1920), the "Biology of Birds" (1923), and his last great work, written again with Geddes, "Life: Outlines of General Biology" (1931), a store-house of biological themes. On the popular side, the larger works which were probably most widely read were "The Outline of Science" which he edited and mostly wrote, and "The New Natural History".

Many honours came to Sir Arthur: he was invited to give several important series of lectures in Great Britain, in South Africa and America; he was created a knight on retirement from his chair, and then also Aberdeen made him an LL.D., a degree which had already been conferred upon him by his own University of Edinburgh, and by McGill University and University of California. Throughout it all he preserved a charmingly simple, almost shy demeanour, which hid a warm heart and much friendliness.

Sir Arthur Thomson could not have accomplished his vast output without the active assistance of Lady Thomson, herself a naturalist, and it is evidence of the strength of heredity and of the influence of early nurture, that each of the members of their family, three sons and a daughter, has contributed to scientific literature.

JAMES RITCHIE.

PROF. A. H. SAYCE

WITH the passing of Archibald Henry Sayce on February 4, Oxford loses one of the last, if not the last, of the old life-fellows, and the world a link with the scholars, of whom Sayce was by no means the least, who first deciphered the languages of the inscriptions of the old tongues of Mesopotamia and the surrounding regions, and so put on a firm basis the study of the ancient history of the Nearer East.

Sayce was in many respects a most remarkable man. He was born so far back as 1846, the oldest son of the Rev. H. S. Sayce, vicar of Caldicot, Mon., and even in undergraduate days had the misfortune to have bad health, but he was endowed with a remarkable persistence, and a scarcely less remarkable memory. He found the handling of heavy texts, lexicons and dictionaries an unpleasant task, and certainly for very many years abandoned their use, preferring to quote, not always perhaps accurately, from his well-stored memory. It is perhaps to this fact that we owe the enormous breadth of his learning, for he remembered all he read and up to the very last was reading and annotating with many linguistic