

# REVEALING TRIMONTIUM

The Correspondence of  
**James Curle of Melrose**  
Excavator of Newstead Roman Fort



Edited by

**Donald Gordon, Fraser Hunter  
and Phil Freeman**



very much  
from your  
family  
as I don't  
drop on  
the  
since

Yours very  
Lover  
C. C.

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Newstead Roman Fort

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Donald Gordon, Fraser Hunter  
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ARCHAEOLOGICAL LIVES



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Archaeological Lives

Cover: James Curle later in life. © Courtesy of HES. Mary Curle Album.

Assorted letters sent to Curle.

Graffiti of Dometius Atticus on the backing plates of military decorations. Photo by Neil McLean,  
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Frontispiece: One of Curle's letters. Photo by Neil McLean, © National Museums Scotland

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# Foreword

As one of James Curle's grandchildren growing up in Melrose I was always aware of the Roman camp and his part in its excavation. It was only later, on finding bundles of his letters, that I began to understand the extent of his correspondence and his enthusiasm for learning. His passport, which I possess, shows the extent of his travels in the pursuit of such knowledge, even the smallest detail.

His great love of the Borders and of Melrose made him the man that he was. But the fort at Newstead was the overriding interest of his life as the Report on the excavation shows.

I am delighted that the publication of the letters will add to the appreciation of the wide interest he showed in many aspects of archaeology.

*Lady Jean Cameron of Lochbroom*

## Acknowledgments

We are very grateful to many people for their encouragement, forbearance, and skill in bringing together these groups of letters. Donald Gordon would like to thank his co-editors: Dr Fraser Hunter, National Museums Scotland, an old friend and enthusiast who saw the possibilities and led the way; and Dr Phil Freeman of Liverpool University, who knows his Haverfield and far, far more. He also thanks Mike Bishop, archaeologist, busy publisher and site guide and lecturer in days of yore; Lady Jean Cameron of Lochbroom for her constant encouragement and support; Professor Lawrence Keppie; all the translators – Mrs Elfriede Mackay, Mrs Ishbel Gordon, ever tolerant of domestic disruption, Dr Connie and Mr Brian Martin; the Old Gala Club and Sutherland Masons Archive for photographs; the British Museum authorities and staff, in particular Francesca Hillier (Senior Archivist) and Thomas Kiely; Alain Wright of the Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland; and the Trustees of the Haverfield Bequest. Fraser Hunter is grateful to Tori Adams, Alice Blackwell, David Clarke, James Graham-Campbell, Julie Holder, Stefanie Hoss, Dan Potter, Louis Swinkels, Friederike Voigt, Colin Wallace, and Marenne Zandstra for assistance with journeys down assorted antiquarian rabbit holes. The Trimontium Trust readily gave permission to republish material previously published under their aegis. We thank Alan Braby for his fine re-drawings of Curle's sketches, and the staff at *Archaeopress* for their attention in preparing the publication.



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

We gather here some of the key groups of correspondence by and to James Curle, a solicitor in Melrose in the Scottish Borders and a prominent antiquary (Figures 1.1–1.2). He is best known today for his excavation and seminal publication of the Roman fort of Newstead (*Trimontium*), near Melrose,<sup>1</sup> the results of which still influence scholarship to this day, but some of his wider interests have been recognised by scholars assessing his Swedish antiquarian work.<sup>2</sup> Four main groups of correspondence totalling 156 letters or notes, published here with accompanying critical apparatus, are used to illustrate his working methods around the Newstead excavations and on other antiquarian topics. One set is his correspondence with various staff members in the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum, primarily Charles Hercules Read and Reginald Smith; a second, smaller set comprises the surviving correspondence with curators in the same museum's Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities; a third series was to Francis Haverfield, the foremost Romanist of his day in Britain; and a fourth, more eclectic set illustrates wider links, especially to continental scholars.<sup>3</sup> As discussed below, the archive history of these four sets gives each a coherence. To this we have added other relevant letters that have come our way. Curle was an inveterate correspondent, and there will undoubtedly be more archive material – his correspondence with other Scottish antiquaries is poorly represented in this collection – but what is presented here seems to us a representative sample that allows broader assessment of his important work on Roman topics and selected other aspects.



Figure 1.1. James Curle later in life.  
© Courtesy of HES. Mary Curle Album

The other key archive source for his Newstead work is his set of excavation notebooks, now held in the archive collections of the National Record of the Historic Environment in Edinburgh. We have consulted them in the course of this work but have not attempted a

<sup>1</sup> Curle 1911a. See Chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> Kidd and Thunmark-Nylén 1990; Kidd 1994.

<sup>3</sup> The first and third sets have been published previously (Gordon 2005; 2008); here we offer more extended critical apparatus and context.

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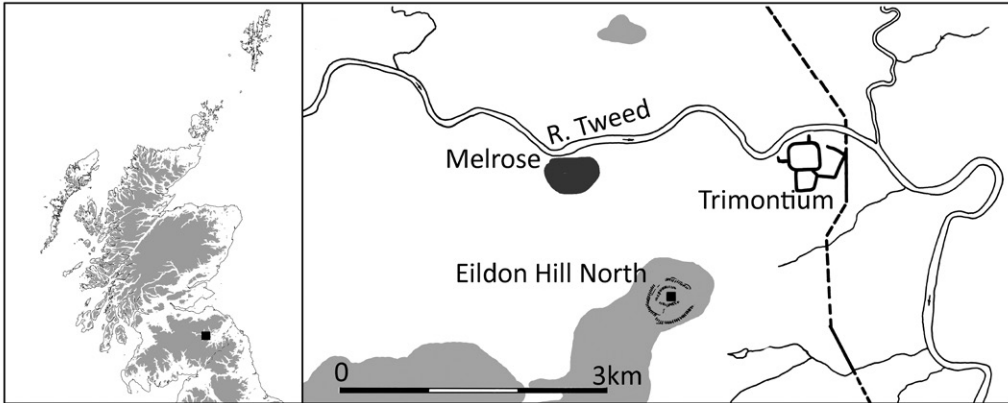


Figure 1.2. Map locating Melrose and Trimontium.  
Ground over 250m is shaded.

critical edition of them; this would add great value to the existing archive of *Trimontium* but is beyond what we can attempt here. There are two sets of notebooks. One contains a mixture of field observations (fair copies, not the original field notes which do not survive), artefact descriptions (with lists and drawings of material before it went to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland [NMAS] in Edinburgh), and notes from his reading and travels. The other is a series of thematic notebooks where he gathered and sorted information ready for the publication: one can see in these the structure and often the very wording that appeared in print, with plentiful sketches that served as an aide memoire. Curle was a very competent draughtsman, and this was clearly a key element in his scholarly apparatus; one finds in the notebooks and letters sketches of comparative material as well as his own finds, a critical tool in the days before photocopiers and scanners.

We are also fortunate in being able to draw on personal collections and family archive from the descendants of James Curle, and have used this where appropriate to add to the picture of the man.

A series of introductory essays look at Curle himself (Chapter 2), his work as an antiquary (Chapter 4), his connections to Francis Haverfield (Chapter 5), and his life as a key part of Melrose society (Chapter 6); his writing and travels took him far and wide, but he was at heart a Borderer. The groups of letters are provided with a critical apparatus in footnotes. Key individuals who are mentioned in the letters as contacts of Curle's appear in a cast of *dramatis personae* (Chapter 7); if an individual is not footnoted, this is where to find them. Figure 1.3 locates the main British and Irish places mentioned in the Letters; Table 2.1 lists his wider travels.

We have inevitably found loose ends that we cannot currently resolve, and would be delighted to hear of further leads and letters to illuminate this fascinating man.

## INTRODUCTION

### Conventions

Footnotes seek to clarify the contents of letters and their context, focusing on aspects important to archaeology. Deletions by Curle are retained but struck through, ~~thus~~. Curle frequently illustrated his letters with ink sketches. Available copies were hard to reproduce; they have been redrawn by Alan Braby. Works by James Curle referenced in footnotes are quoted simply as Curle xxxx; those of other Curles include initials to differentiate them.

### Abbreviations

BM	British Museum
NMAS	National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (now part of National Museums Scotland)
RMS	Royal Museum of Scotland (now part of National Museums Scotland)

Table 1.1: significant places in Britain and Ireland mentioned in the Letters; the numbers correlate with Figure 1.3.

1	Ambleside	22	Cirencester	43	Lochlee
2	Ardvouray	23	Colchester	44	London
3	Aylesford	24	Corbridge	45	Middlebie
4	Balmuildy	25	Cramond	46	Milsington
5	Bar Hill	26	Croy	47	Oronsay
6	Bertha	27	Dorchester	48	Polden Hill
7	Bhaltos	28	Dowkerbottom Cave	49	Porth Dafarch, Holyhead
8	Birdoswald	29	Dublin	50	Pudding Pan Rock
9	Birrens	30	Edinshall	51	Ribchester
10	Borness Cave	31	Eildon Hill North	52	Richborough
11	Bosham	32	Erickstanebrae	53	Rough Castle
12	Bow	33	Ewell	54	Santon Downham
13	<i>Bremenium</i>	34	Glastonbury	55	Settle
14	Brentford	35	Glenmailen	56	Silchester
15	Broughter	36	Great Chesters	57	Stanwick
16	Burrian	37	Grimthorpe	58	Taplow
17	Camelon	38	Guisborough	59	Torrs
18	Cappuck	39	Hod Hill	60	Torwoodlee
19	Castlecary	40	Housesteads	61	<i>Trimontium</i>
20	Chesters	41	Inveresk	62	<i>Vindolanda</i>
21	Chew Green	42	Lincoln	63	Welwyn

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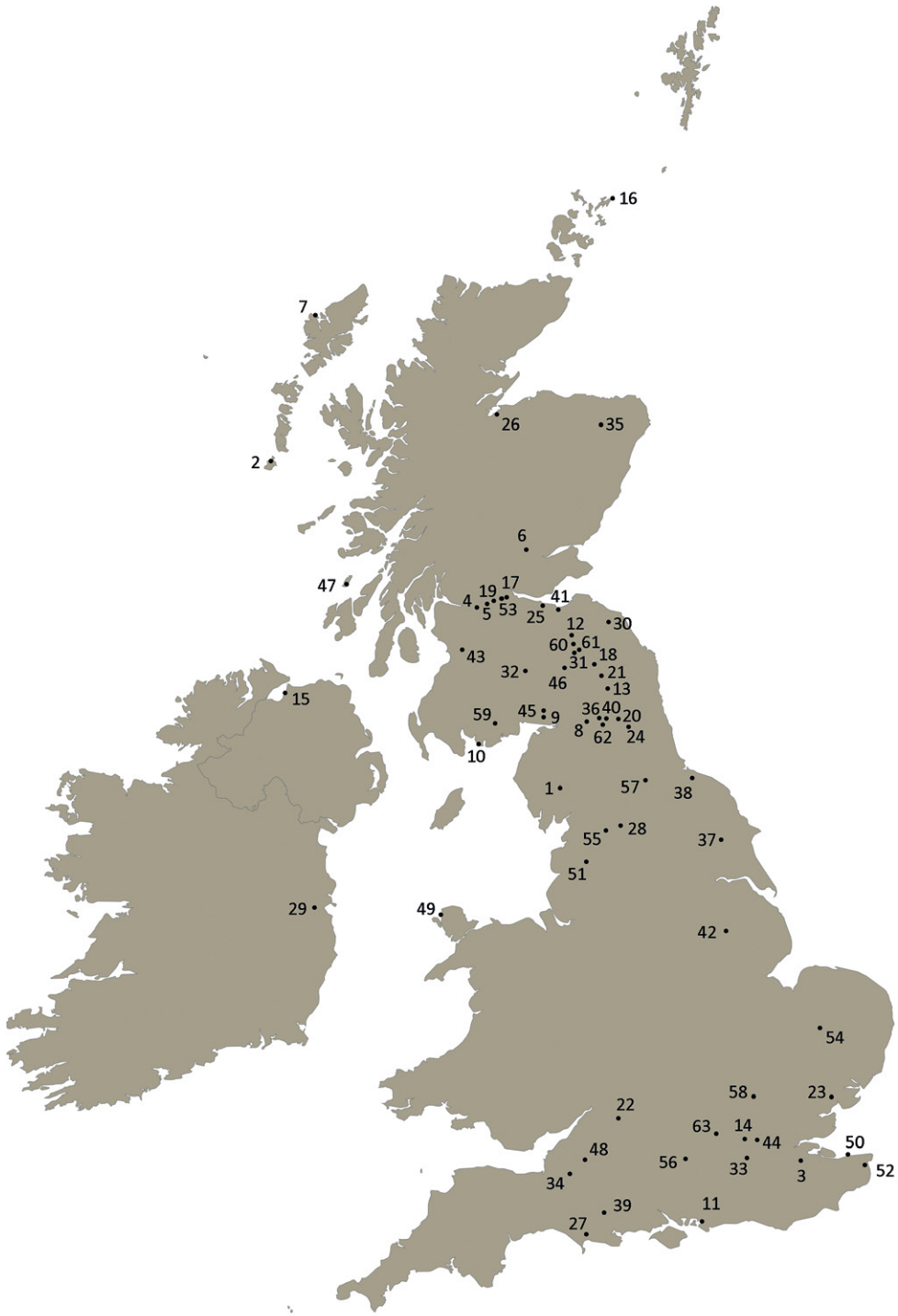


Figure 1.3. Key British and Irish sites and findspots mentioned in the letters.

## Chapter 2

# James Curle and his Letters

Donald Gordon

‘I hope to hear from you one day soon, if you have not abandoned the custom of writing letters.’ (Letter 1.7)

‘Please excuse my inflicting such a long letter upon you.’ (Letter 1.24)

James Curle (1862–1944; Figures 1.1, 2.1) was a lawyer by profession, but his interest in archaeology led to his excavating and publishing the Roman fort of Newstead (*Trimontium*), a landmark excavation which remains oft-quoted across Roman scholarship today.<sup>1</sup> His correspondence, much of which is drawn together here in four groups, gives insights into Curle’s network of contacts which enabled this great work, and displays his wider antiquarian interests.



Figure 2.1. James Curle as a young man, c. 1890. By courtesy of the family.

Curle was the eldest son of a legal family in the small town of Melrose on the River Tweed in the Scottish Borders, some 56 km south of Edinburgh. The three Eildon Hills, c.400 m high, form a dominant landmass and backdrop to the town on the south (Figure 2.2). The Latin name *Trimontium* – the Place of the Three Hills – became the title of the large 1st- and 2nd-century AD Roman fort and settlement which grew up a mile east of what is now Melrose, in the lee of the hills, at the village of Newstead (Figure 3.6). It was one of the largest and longest-occupied Roman settlements in Scotland.

James’s grandfather had been Sir Walter Scott’s ‘man of business’, a fact of which the family was very proud (Abbotsford, Sir Walter’s estate, is 6.5 km west of Melrose).<sup>2</sup> The extended Curle family had antiquarian interests. Alexander, father of James, introduced him and his brother Alexander (A.O.) to the National Museum of Antiquities in Edinburgh as boys.<sup>3</sup> A.O. Curle became a noted professional archaeologist,<sup>4</sup> and his son, Alexander Tancred (Sandy; 1900–1986) researched and collected archaeological matters while working in east Africa.<sup>5</sup> Sandy’s second wife, Cecil Louisa Mowbray (1901–1987), was a renowned archaeologist in her

<sup>1</sup> Curle 1911a.

<sup>2</sup> Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) was the greatest novelist of his age, poet, playwright and something of an antiquary in his own right. See Brown 2003; Kelly 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 4..

<sup>4</sup> See *Dramatis personae*.

<sup>5</sup> See C. Curle (ed.) 2008: 14, 19, 41, 63, 73, 80, 82, 122, 130–131, 143–144, 166, 171, 176, 193, 247; A.T. Curle 1937a and b. He was also a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.



Figure 2.2. The three Eildon hills which gave the fort its Latin name *Trimontium*, viewed from the east.  
© Lawrence Keppie.

own right, publishing on her excavations in Shetland, on Pictish monuments, and on the early medieval finds from Birsay in Orkney.<sup>6</sup> A distant cousin, R.A. Curle of Overwells, Jedburgh, donated a Roman intaglio from Cappuck to NMAS<sup>7</sup> and was a member of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club for a short time before moving south.

James's solicitor father, Alexander (a 'Writer' to the Signet, in Scots terminology; 1819–1897) had a large Victorian family of three sons (educated at Fettes College, Edinburgh) and four daughters. As the eldest son, James (signing himself as James Curle Jr during his grandfather's lifetime) had to forego University for a career in the family firm, training as a Writer to the Signet,<sup>8</sup> while brother Alexander Ormiston Curle went to Cambridge University, later to work for the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, become a Museum Director and be known for excavations at Traprain Law in East Lothian and Jarlshof, in Shetland, *inter alia*. Both became Fellows (and office bearers) of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, like their friend Mr, later Sir, George Macdonald, another of the great names of Roman archaeology in Scotland.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Mowbray 1936a; 1936b; C.L. Curle 1940; 1982.

<sup>7</sup> *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 49 (1914–1915): 12; Stevenson and Miller 1912: 476 n.1.

<sup>8</sup> This involved serving a five-year apprenticeship with a law firm and attending courses at Edinburgh University in Civil / Roman Law, Conveyancing and Scots Law, but was examined by the Society of Writers to Her Majesty's Signet, the incorporated body of Scottish lawyers, not by the University. We are grateful to Mr James Hamilton, Research Principal of the Society, for this information.

<sup>9</sup> See *Dramatis personae*.

In the 1890s and the first decade of the 20th century there was an upsurge in the excavation of Roman forts in Scotland, driven by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and James Curle took charge of the excavation of Newstead between 1905 and 1910.<sup>10</sup> In 1911 he published a 450-page magisterial Report *A Roman frontier post and its people: the fort of Newstead in the parish of Melrose* (Figure 2.3),<sup>11</sup> documenting a sensational series of military and civilian finds from this large fort based at the River Tweed crossing point of the Roman Great North Road, called by its medieval name of Dere Street. These remarkable survivals come from over 100 waterlogged pits, which are the internationally known feature and enigma of Newstead.

### Letters to Hercules

Curle conducted an ongoing correspondence on finds and comparanda with eminent figures in the British Museum, from 1891 to 1931 (Gordon 2008). The title for that extensive group of letters is **Letters to Hercules**, a gesture to Sir Charles Hercules Read, Keeper of the Department of British and Medieval Antiquities at the Museum (Figure 2.4); they are reprinted here with additional letters and expanded notes.

The gathering of this correspondence in London was an adventure in itself, well worth describing. During the consultation of aerial photographs of the Roman site at Newstead (*Trimontium*) in the National Monuments Record in Edinburgh<sup>12</sup> it was noticed that Mr Dafydd Kidd of the British Museum had forwarded, for interest and for the record, copies of James Curle letters to the BM, particularly in relation to Curle's extensive personal collection of Gotlandic bronzes, which the BM had sent a clerk to arrange systematically in Melrose and which it purchased outright in 1921.<sup>13</sup>

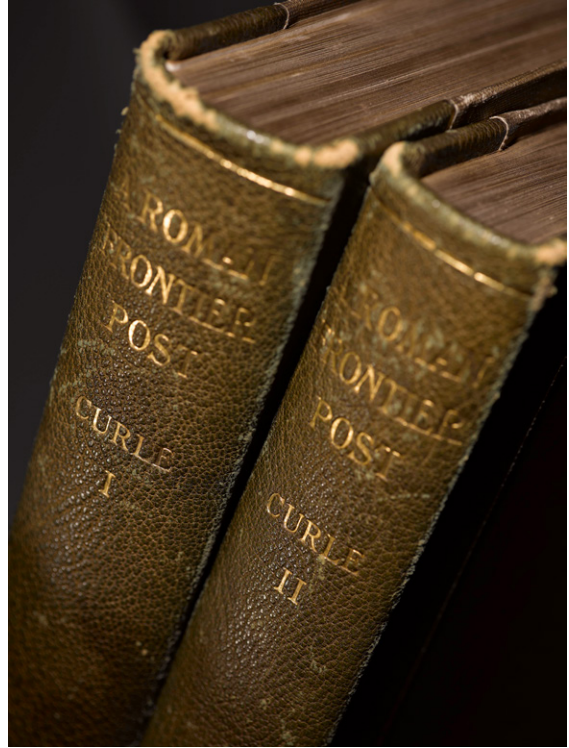


Figure 2.3. The two-volume edition of Curle's 1911 Report.  
Photo by Neil McLean, © National Museums Scotland

<sup>10</sup> For background see D.V. Clarke 2012.

<sup>11</sup> In keeping with the classical education of his day James was familiar with the principles of Latin and Greek prose and verse, and exercises in speaking aloud (declamation) and composition, which influenced his own writing style in English. Whether through conscious use or otherwise, this can be seen in the construction of the two-part title of the 1911 Report. The writer considers that *A Roman Frontier Post and its People* reveals a line of five 'beats' or 'feet' (a pentameter), while *The fort of Newstead in the parish of Melrose* gives six 'beats' or 'feet' (a hexameter). Let the reader listen and decide.

<sup>12</sup> Now the National Record of the Historic Environment (NRHE), curated by Historic Environment Scotland.

<sup>13</sup> Kidd and Thunmark-Nylén 1990. See Letters 1.16, 1.79–1.84.



Figure 2.4. Charles Hercules Read, Keeper of the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities and Ethnography at the British Museum, and a regular correspondent of Curle's.  
© Trustees of the British Museum

The writer, former Honorary Secretary of the Trimontium Trust which was set up in 1988 to encourage public interest in the site,<sup>14</sup> wondered if that seam of letters had been fully mined, and his pursuit of that enquiry over the years has added to the collection. An initial direct postal enquiry at the BM having proved unfruitful, Prof. Lawrence Keppie let drop the information that Mr Neil McGregor, Director of the Museum, was a Glasgow University graduate. Emboldened, the writer wrote to him for assistance, chancing his arm 'as one Glasgow graduate to another', and the process began. From an exchange of letters with archivist Francesca Hillier and staff member Sylvie Seton and the lists that they kindly sent, it became apparent that there were indeed more Curle letters to be seen. It was suggested that if I came to London I could see and copy them for myself.

There began a series of sporadic visits in the 2000s by early morning train from Edinburgh Waverley or Berwick-

upon-Tweed to King's Cross, a brisk walk to Great Russell Street by 10am, a pre-arranged place in the Students' Room till about 4pm, broken by a statutory one-hour displacement for lunch in the Great Hall, with a fascinating day's work laid out before me in huge, annual, leather-clad and alphabetically-arranged correspondence volumes, with letters in the familiar James Curle handwriting in the 'Cu' section and, wondrous to see, a copy of the occasional reply from a BM correspondent inserted behind the Curle letter on a sheet of tissue paper. For one who had experience of few replies from Haverfield to Curle (see below), the finding of replies from Sir Charles Hercules Read and Reginald A. Smith was a treasure. Then came an energetic walk back to the station, a reflective return, usually to Berwick, and an hour's drive home.

### From Greece and Rome

These letters came from the archives of what is now the Department of Prehistory & Europe; a letter in the *From Home and Abroad* collection opened up further avenues, as it came from the Keeper of the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities (Letter 4.4). Further enquiries revealed a small group of letters which are often complementary to the first series, as Curle pursued additional lines of enquiry. The surviving letters are partial; it is clear that

<sup>14</sup> See Gordon 2012a.

Curle corresponded with H.B. Walters in this department, for instance, but none of this correspondence survives.<sup>15</sup>

### **My Dear Haverfield**

During the 1905–10 excavations, Curle had sought advice, as a supplicant, from Francis Haverfield (1860–1919), Camden Professor of Ancient History at the University of Oxford, who was the guru of Romano–British studies and a dominant figure in archaeology (Figure 5.1). The existence of the letters in the Haverfield Archive in the Ashmolean (now Sackler) Library was reported to the writer by Professor Lawrence Keppie in the late 1990s when the ingathering of Curle’s writings seemed a worthwhile project. An arranged visit to the Library in 1998 led to the transcription of the letters and permission to publish them in 2005 in booklet form<sup>16</sup> to accompany a Melrose lecture by Dr P.W.M. Freeman, the authority on Haverfield.<sup>17</sup> They are reprinted here with additional letters and expanded notes under Curle’s eventual and growingly confident title of **My Dear Haverfield**. Curle’s gratitude for Haverfield’s help is acknowledged generously in the Report.<sup>18</sup>

### **From Home and Abroad**

James was an international traveller both before and after his marriage in 1902, with the occasional friend or family member, all over Europe, especially Scandinavia, as well as North Africa and, in 1899, for two months in the USA (Table 2.1; Figure 2.5). He was accustomed to visit museums, assess the displays and discuss the conservation techniques of the day. This was revealed when a third group of letters came to light in 2011, found by granddaughter Lady Jean Cameron of Lochbroom. Many came from scholars on the Continent, congratulating Curle on his famous discoveries and extolling their visits to him, while others carried renewed queries from English scholars keen to continue the discussions. To reflect the contents this section is entitled **From Home and Abroad**.

*Table 2.1. The travels of James Curle derived from his passport (in the family’s possession, covering 1886–1903), Letters or other sources. It will be incomplete for the period after 1903. Letter 4.10 implies a visit to Switzerland prior to 1913 but subsequent to the 1889 trip.*

Year	Countries	Notes/source
1886	Italy via France and Switzerland	
1887	Norway via Sweden and Denmark	
1888	Sweden	
1889	Austria and Hungary via Germany, Switzerland and Paris	
1890	Russia via Sweden and Denmark	

<sup>15</sup> Letter 3.19. Thomas Kiely, pers. comm.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon 2005.

<sup>17</sup> e.g. Freeman 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Curle 1911a: viii. ‘Among those who have helped me, I must especially mention Professor Haverfield of Oxford and Mr George Macdonald, of Edinburgh. Professor Haverfield and Mr Macdonald have both read the proofs of this volume, and to their sympathy and encouragement throughout the whole undertaking, no less than to their scholarship, I cannot too fully express my indebtedness’.

## REVEALING TRIMONTIUM

1891	Sweden via Denmark	Letters 1.1, 1.2
1892	France via Channel Islands	
1892	Germany	Letters 1.4, 1.5
1893	Netherlands	
1893	Sweden via Denmark	
1894	Algeria and Tunisia via France	
1895	Spain via France	
1896	Sweden via Denmark and Germany	Letter 1.12
1897	France	Letter 1.12
1898	France	
1898	Austria via Belgium	
1899	France	
1899	USA	Letter 1.14
1900	France	
1901	Sweden	
1902	Italy via France (honeymoon)	Letter 1.16
1903	Sweden	
1904		
1905	Sweden	Letter 3.2
1906	Germany, Belgium	Letter 1.30
1907		
1908	Germany	Letters 1.48, 3.21
1909		
1910		
1911		
1912		
1913	Germany	Curle 1917a mentions this tour

JAMES CURLE AND HIS LETTERS

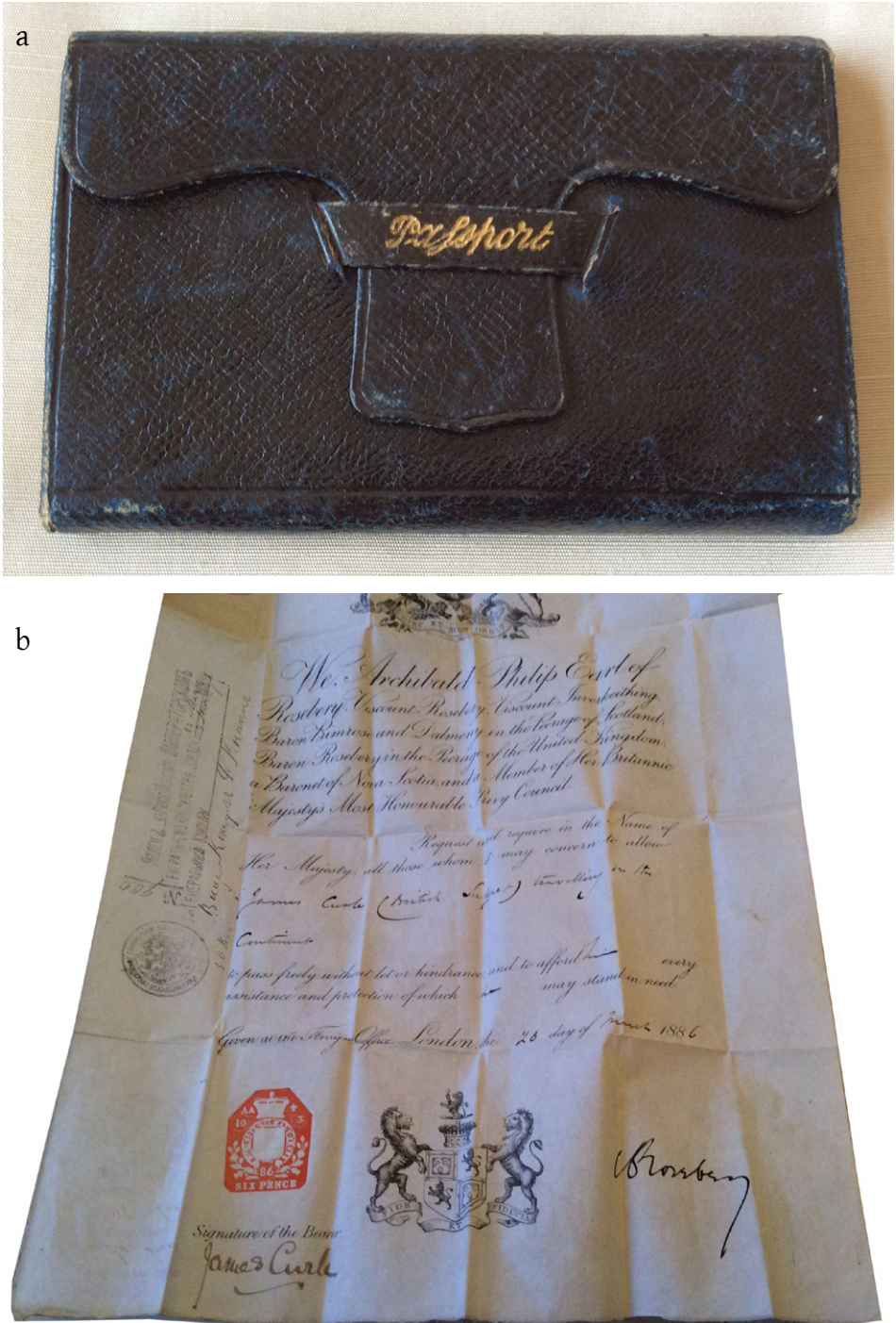


Figure 2.5. Curle's passport. a: folded into a wallet. b: unfolded. The passport was authorised and signed by Viscount Rosebery, and signed by Curle bottom left. Photos by Donald Gordon, reproduced by courtesy of the family.

## Miscellanea

Other letters gathered over the years from outwith these major collections and to other correspondents are considered in a separate section, while a small group of letters between the British Museum and James's brother A.O. Curle is added as an Appendix. Five letters relating to Curle's links to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland have been traced in NMS library archives; only one is relevant to his Roman interests, and is reproduced here (Letter 5.1).<sup>19</sup>

## Curle considered

The place of James Curle and his youngest brother Alexander Ormiston Curle (A.O.) in the Scottish archaeological and society establishment was set out by J.N.G. Ritchie.<sup>20</sup> A member of many public bodies, James became a member of the monarch's ceremonial bodyguard in Scotland, the Royal Company of Archers in 1897 (Figure 6.2), and A.O. had a distinguished career in the National Museum (see *Dramatis personae*).

A detailed narrative of how James took on the project at Newstead<sup>21</sup> and an assessment of how highly his work should be regarded is given by Dr D.V. Clarke, who tackles the assumption that Curle was somehow a lesser figure than Macdonald or Haverfield: neither had Curle's experience of running a large excavation over several years.<sup>22</sup> Clarke indicates Curle's wide circle of friends and acquaintances in the archaeological world; his confidence in his own judgment of people and pride in his collection of bronzes; his ease in the company of senior academics; and the way he produced a Report unique in the annals of the Scottish Antiquaries. Although Clarke does not go so far as to declare that the evidence is conclusive, he suggests that it demonstrates that Curle had carefully planned the work and its interpretation: 'If this is the case, [James Curle] deserves to be treated as a very significant figure in the history of Roman archaeology in Britain'.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The others relate to acquisitions which Curle's father had facilitated (SAS UC Ms. 17/505, 15 March 1887; Ms. 17/370, 1 June 1890); library business (Ms. 31/47, 12 June 1895); and a letter to Joseph Anderson (Ms. 25/135, 18 November 1895) that discusses designs, perhaps for a bookplate(?). Its context is too uncertain to merit inclusion.

<sup>20</sup> Ritchie 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Like many scholars of the time he was shy of claiming it as *Trimontium*, although he used the term in later work, e.g. Curle 1929.

<sup>22</sup> D.V. Clarke 2012.

<sup>23</sup> D.V. Clarke 2012: 32.