James Clerk Maxwell plaque – 129 Union Street

The first plaque on the building where Maxwell lived in Aberdeen was a small bronze erected in 1956 to mark the centenary of his appointment at Marischal College. It was, though, inconspicuous and contained a minor error. In 2017 the bronze was replaced by the Institute of Physics blue plaque shown above. Maxwell was the last Professor of Natural Philosophy at ‘Marischal College and University’ before it was amalgamated with King’s College to become the University of Aberdeen. Also to mark the centenary, a bust was commissioned from the artist Pilkington Jackson that has been placed on the south wall of the picture gallery in Marischal College. Unfortunately, the gallery is not often open to the public.

More about Maxwell’s work is said in a companion piece relating to Marischal College. He rented the flat in 129 Union Street, within 5 minutes walking distance of the College. Just after his appointment as Professor his father died, before Maxwell had taken up residence, and he inherited the small family estate in Kirkcudbrightshire. Maxwell knew it well, for he had spent formative years of his childhood there. He returned to run the estate when the students were not in College, namely April though to the end of October in those days.

In the late 1850s shortly before 9 am any winter’s morning you might well have seen the young James Clerk Maxwell, in his mid to late 20s, a man of middling height, with frame strongly knit, and a certain spring and elasticity in his gait; dressed for comfortable ease rather than elegance; a face expressive at once of sagacity and good humour, but overlaid with a deep shade of thoughtfulness; features boldly put pleasingly marked; eyes dark and glowing; hair and beard perfectly black, and forming a strong contrast to the pallor of his complexion. The description is from a former student of his at Marischal College who became
librarian at the University of Aberdeen.

Maxwell was a frequent visitor in the years 1857/1858 to Principal Dewar’s house at 13 Victoria Street, following which he married Dewar’s daughter Katherine in June of 1858. They were, by all accounts, a devoted couple¹. From Aberdeen they moved in 1860 to London, then to Maxwell’s estate in SW Scotland and finally to Cambridge.

Maxwell’s tenure at Aberdeen was in a Regius Chair, a Crown appointment, but it was shorter than he anticipated. He left by edict of the Royal Commission under whose auspices the two Universities in Aberdeen were fused (the word describing the merger at the time) in 1860.

¹ The illustration of Maxwell and Katherine is from http://turnbull.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/~history/PictDisplay/Maxwell.html.

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