

OBITUARIES

The Right Hon. H. A. L. Fisher, O.M., F.R.S.

DEATH has been taking a heavy toll of eminent Oxford men within the last few months. First, Prof. Joachim died about a year ago; then his intimate friend Prof. J. A. Smith; then Prof. Samuel Alexander, who had made his name at Lincoln College before he went to Manchester. Then, on April 18, came the death of Mr. H. A. L. Fisher, who was, of course, much the best-known public man of the group. In one way he must surely have been unique, in giving many years of service as a Minister of the Crown and then having a long tenure of the wardenship of New College, Oxford.

Fisher was taken into the war cabinet as Minister of Education by Mr. Lloyd George—to whom he was always much attached—in the year 1916 when the great changes were made which displaced Lord Asquith. He remained as Minister of Education until 1926 and used his position to make the most vigorous efforts to raise the standard of national education by raising the age for leaving school and in other ways improving the chances of education for young people when they came to leave. In these efforts he gained the hearty support of the whole teaching profession, whose status he considerably improved by raising the salaries of masters and mistresses in secondary schools.

No one perhaps has ever deserved so much of the whole body of teachers and scholars as did Mr. Fisher. It will be remembered that it was found impracticable to carry out at once the raising of the age which his Act proposed. The matter was left in abeyance and in constant dispute until the present Government took it up again two years ago and—with certain reservations—at last made the Fisher Act a living thing. How it will work remains to be seen when the modifying Act is at last to be put in operation.

On leaving the Ministry in 1926, Fisher went back to his old College, this time as head, for he had been by education a Winchester and New College man. He remained as warden of New College until his death, and was one of the best-known and respected figures in Oxford.

In the world of letters he became best known by his "History of Europe", which quickly rose to the distinction of a best-seller. It was published in 1936 after intense labour which reduced Fisher to a chronic state of weak health for the last three or four years of his life. He tells us in the preface that his subject is "Man from the neolithic age to Stalin and Mustapha Kemal, Mussolini and Hitler". But he damps the hopes of believers in progress by saying that "one intellectual excitement has been denied me. Men wiser and more learned than I have discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me.

I can only see one emergency following upon another as wave follows upon wave. There can be no generalization, only one safe rule for the historian; that he should recognize in the development of human destinies the play of the unforeseen and the contingent". It was true indeed in the course of his own life, for who could have foreseen that the best-known historian in England and the leading figure in Oxford academic life would have been struck down at last by a lorry on Millbank. His friends had been anxious for his health for some years. They thought that he would yield to the strain of excessive and prolonged intellectual work. But no! It was the contingent, a passing lorry, which might have carried away any insignificant citizen of London, which ended one of the most active and distinguished lives of our day.

F. S. MARVIN.

Prof. S. M. Dixon, O.B.E.

PROF. STEPHEN MITCHELL DIXON, who died on March 25 at Nice at the age of seventy-four, was a leader in civil engineering education. Born in Dublin, he studied experimental physics and carried out research under Fitzgerald at Trinity College, and then qualified in civil engineering. After experience as contractor's engineer on railway works in England he was appointed to a newly established chair of civil engineering at Fredricton, New Brunswick, in 1892. Ten years later he moved to Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia, and in 1905 was called to Birmingham to organize the Department of Civil Engineering. When, in the general re-organization following the formation of the Imperial College of Science and Technology, the Mechanical and Civil Department of the City and Guilds (Engineering) College was divided into two autonomous departments in 1912, Dixon was called to the chair of civil engineering there.

Dixon was a great teacher who had the gift of infecting those around him with some of his own unlimited enthusiasm and of getting the best out of his students and staff without apparent effort. He had the probably unique record of having started four university departments of civil engineering. Dixon's approach to his subject was practical rather than theoretical, and he combined a sound foundation of the mechanical principles with a deep distrust of complicated theories and involved calculations. His fertile and active mind led him to devise many new ways of tackling well-known problems—a typical example was the use of a sand core for moulding pre-cast hollow concrete blocks. Old students will remember how he built a house, almost unaided, to prove the practicability of this pre-cast block.

In his earlier years, Dixon carried out research on terrestrial magnetism and on surveying instruments,