

## 2005 Research Forum / Conway Library Project

### *Persistence of Antiquity*

#### **Katharine Higgon's Biography of Martin Conway**

In the course of investigating Martin Conway's collection of photography I was able to research a great deal of biographical information. Martin Conway lived a fascinating and varied life, in which collecting photographs was only one of many pursuits.

William Martin Conway was born in April 1856, son of Reverend William Conway, then canon at Rochester Cathedral, and his wife Elizabeth Martin. Martin was their third child and first son, and although a brother was born in 1859 he was sickly and soon died. In 1864 the family moved to Westminster where his father became canon, so that Martin grew up fascinated by medieval history; assisting in excavations and even handling remains – including the brain of King Richard II. From here Martin was sent to Repton School and afterwards was admitted to Cambridge to study Mathematics; with the intention of following his father's career and joining the church. However, the death of Reverend William in 1876 allowed his 20 year old son freedom he had never before experienced. He dropped any idea of joining the church and also gave up his mathematical studies, spending a few terms engaged in those idle pursuits so abundant at Cambridge – primarily dinner parties and boating. Eventually he found his way into a lecture, one being given by Sidney Colvin, then Slade Professor of Art at Cambridge. Martin's eyes were opened to un-dreamt of possibilities. He went to the Fitzwilliam Museum, discovered their print collection, went to the University Library and discovered their woodcuts, went to Paris and discovered the Louvre. Meanwhile he chose a Tripos subject by drawing names from a hat – History came out – and scraped a Third (History of Art not being a recognised subject at this point). This hardly mattered and Conway began to catalogue the Dutch incunabula at the University Library, spending a year researching in Europe and ultimately publishing, in 1884, *The Woodcutters of the Netherlands*. In 1885, at the age of 28, he was offered the post of Roscoe Professor of Art at Liverpool, a non-

teaching post which required him to do little more than make after-dinner speeches at university events; although he did take the opportunity to hold several exhibitions and continued to publish. In 1901 he became Slade Professor at Cambridge; a position which he felt validated his unacknowledged hard work amongst Cambridge collections.

In addition to these academic concerns, Martin Conway also pursued more athletic hobbies. He had first visited the Alps in 1874 during his summer holidays, which sparked a love of climbing and exploration. His first published work was a pocket guide to all the known established climbs in the Alps, a project he intended to record recognised paths and to allow the exploration of new ones. Martin mounted various expeditions during the eighties and nineties; beating the then climbing record by ascending to 23,000 feet during an 1892 trip to the Karakorum range in the Himalayas; mapping the interior of Spitzbergen in 1896 and surveying the Bolivian Andes in 1898. It was his mountaineering feats which first earned him widespread recognition, when he was knighted in 1895 for his work in the Himalayas. The Conway Library archive contains some photographs taken at the Himalayan base camp, where a member of the team made a bust of Martin out of snow, adding a pipe and an incongruous wreath of local vegetation!

In 1903 Martin Conway purchased a ruined castle, Allington in Kent, and spent many hours and much money excavating, restoring and renovating at this property. The castle formed the backdrop to many paintings and sculptures which Conway assiduously collected throughout his life, beginning in 1887 when at the exhortation of Giovanni Morelli he purchased a painting by Foppa in an antiques shop. His most treasured pieces were two landscapes which he discovered in a backwater shop in St Jean de Luz whilst motoring around France. These he attributed to Giorgione, defending his stance in 1929's *Giorgione as a Landscape Painter*. His collection was varied, however, and included Roman busts, medieval statues, Elizabethan furniture, ceramics and carpets from the Middle East and antiques from Egypt. In addition to this collection he spent a great many of the pre-war years

occupied with his photographs, developing the system of mounting, annotating and arranging which can still be found today.

Conway's later career was as varied as that of his youth. He had ventured into politics in 1895, when he stood for election at Bath. He was unsuccessful; but later, in 1918, was elected as MP for the Universities. In 1917 he was asked by the government to develop some record of the ongoing war; a project which grew into the Imperial War Museum, of which Conway was the first Director. He travelled to France to collect artefacts for display, getting as close to the Front as he dared. In 1924 the government asked him to embark on quite a different journey, travelling to post-revolution Russia in order to ascertain the state of art works and antiquities. Happily he found them well cared for, later describing countless jewelled treasures being paraded before him, until he was sick of diamonds. In 1931 he became a Baron.

Martin had married in 1884, a glamorous American named Katrina Glidden. They had one daughter a year after they married; Agnes Ethel, who was to become a trusted and beloved companion to her father. Encouraged to develop her intelligence, Agnes helped her father with his photographs and publications – indeed, on the front cover of the Courtauld Library copy of Conway's *Historical Paintings in the Houses of Parliament*, he has crossed out his own name and written Agnes instead, as if to acknowledge the true author of the work. Agnes later became an archaeologist of some renown, excavating in the Middle East.

Conway was heavily involved in the foundation of the Courtauld Institute. His donation of his photographic collection to the Institute was an important gift as its high value for the study of art was recognised. For the remainder of his life he was occupied with fussing over the transfer and establishment of the collection at the Courtauld; worrying over the proper filing and arrangement of the boxes and driving to distraction the formidable librarian, Rhoda Welsford. Martin Conway died on April 19<sup>th</sup> 1937, aged 81. His obituary in the

Burlington Magazine, written by his daughter's friend Joan Evans, praises above all the donation of his photograph collection to the Courtauld, by which 'the younger generation ... constantly profit'. She notes with some sadness that 'the modern world of artistic interests, with its committees, its institutions and its highly specialized knowledge, is less likely than Victorian England to encourage men as adventurous, as many-sided and as individual as Lord Conway'. It is fitting, however, that his most lasting memorial is the library which bears his name, still held in the institution which he so often called for, and that the mounts cut, pasted and labelled by his own hands are still used by students and scholars today. This would give Martin Conway endless and lasting satisfaction.