

## LORD OVERTOUN

“ Never—I should warn you first—  
Of my own choice had this, if not the worst  
Yet not the best expedient, served to tell  
A story I could body forth so well.”

JOHN CAMPBELL WHITE, Baron Overtoun of Overtoun in the county of Dumbarton (cr. 1893), died *sine prole* at his Dumbartonshire residence at 5.30 A.M. on Saturday, February 15, 1908, in his sixty-fifth year. On the previous Saturday his Lordship had motored up the Vale of Leven to visit his uncle, a gentleman over ninety years of age, as a result of which he contracted a chill. On the Sabbath, though complaining of illness, he was in his accustomed place at the morning diet of worship at Dumbarton United Free High Church, and in the evening he conducted his Bible class as usual, but on the following day pneumonia supervened. His Lordship's robust constitution caused hopes to be entertained that the dread disease might successfully be resisted, but these were doomed to disappointment, and his illness terminated fatally, as stated.

From the pulpit and press references, sympathetic as they were innumerable, to the sad event, we cull the following as typical: “ The

news of Lord Overtoun's death will be received with an almost personal sorrow in every part of Scotland, for his princely generosity flowed through channels that conveyed its beneficent influence to the remotest corners of the country." Such a tribute, paid as it was in a leading article by a great newspaper which notoriously did not see always eye to eye with his Lordship in regard to the leading ecclesiastical and political questions of the day, is a striking testimony to the high place the deceased nobleman held in the esteem and affections of his fellow-countrymen irrespective of class, creed or political colour. It would have been strange had it been otherwise. The proprietor of a large and successful manufacturing business, the inheritor and—for no man ever more worthily exemplified the truth of the Scriptural adage that "the hand of the diligent maketh rich"—the creator of vast wealth, combining as he did business acumen of no mean order with the greatest religious activity in a manner that commanded universal admiration, John Campbell White was indeed a man remarkable among his compeers. He filled the varied rôle of merchant prince, county magnate, Churchman, evangelist and philanthropist, and later took his place among the legislators of the Upper House of Parliament, this last perhaps in a less degree than his other activities, though even in the House of Lords his influence was exerted on behalf of every good cause.

But the high honour which came to Mr. Campbell White (as he then was) in his fiftieth year, through the instrumentality of Mr. Gladstone, was no more than a timely recognition by the Sovereign of noble and unstinted public service rendered from youth upwards. His devotion to the Free (afterwards United Free) Church may be described as inbred. Born on November 11, 1843, he was literally cradled in the Disruption, his parents having "come out" on that historic occasion just six months before his birth, thereby sacrificing their personal convenience to their convictions and throwing their great influence upon the side of the dissenting body. His father, the late Mr. James White of Shawfield, was at that time practising as a solicitor in Glasgow, but shortly afterwards exchanged law for industry, becoming senior partner in the firm of J. & J. White, chemical manufacturers, Shawfield, Rutherglen, and a highly respected member of the business community of Glasgow, to which the ancient and royal burgh of Rutherglen is adjacent. His mother was a daughter of the late John Campbell, Esq., of Barnhill, Sheriff of Renfrew, and a sister of the late Neil Campbell, Esq., Sheriff of Ayr, a distinguished leader of the Scots Bar and for many years adviser of the Free Church, and was furthermore a woman of great force of character and strong religious convictions. Of the household at Hayfield, Rutherglen, and afterwards at Overtoun, the

palatial Dumbartonshire residence to which Mr. James White removed in 1863, it may indeed be said in the noble words of the National Bard,

From scenes like these old Scotia's grandeur springs  
That makes her loved at home, revered abroad.

There can be no doubt that early training and influence gave the future Lord Overtoun the bent which most characterised his career. He was educated at the Glasgow Academy, and thence proceeded to Glasgow University, Mr. James White, with that proverbial Scottish veneration for learning, being strongly of opinion that a knowledge of the liberal arts is not only not prejudicial but may even be advantageous to a young man designed for commercial pursuits, provided, of course, that he is of the right stamp. Young Mr. Campbell White (as he then was) pursued his university studies at the old College Buildings in High Street, soon to be swept away by the irresistible march of progress and replaced by the magnificent pile with which the genius of the late Sir Gilbert Scott, R.A., has since crowned the romantic heights of Gilmorehill. He showed a marked bent for science, taking prizes in Logic and Natural Philosophy. The latter important subject was then in the distinguished hands of Professor William Thomson, now better known as Lord Kelvin, for whom all his life Lord Overtoun entertained a warm personal regard. It was always a matter for keen regret to Lord

Overtoun that, owing to circumstances over which he had no control, he was unable to accompany Lord Kelvin (or Professor Thomson as he then was) as his assistant on the historic voyage of the *Great Eastern* to lay the Atlantic cable, but in point of fact the post had been filled before his application was received. The association of the two men (each so eminent in their different spheres) was to be renewed later, however, in the House of Lords—though not of course on the same side of it—and it must have afforded the great scientist the keenest satisfaction to be able, within a year of his own elevation, to welcome to the Gilded Chamber one of his old students who had also attained distinction, though in another walk of life.

But, while as a young man Lord Overtoun may have been sensible to the attraction of a scientific career, it was ever a cardinal point in his faith to be content with that position in life to which an All-wise Providence had called him. Accordingly, after taking the degree of M.A. he entered as his father's only son his father's exceedingly prosperous establishment, and in 1867 was assumed as a partner. In the same year he married Grace, daughter of the late Mr. James H. McClure, head of an eminent firm of solicitors in Glasgow. Lady Overtoun was her husband's devoted helpmeet and the tireless coadjutor in all his manifold beneficent activities, but there was no issue of the union. In due course, upon

the demise of his father and uncle, Mr. Campbell White (as he then was) became sole proprietor of Messrs. J. & J. White's vast enterprise, reputed to be the largest of its kind in the world. The firm's principal output is chrome, a commodity which, needless to say, is of prime importance to the leather trade. Under Lord Overtoun's wise and capable direction its prosperity continued undiminished and large profits were realised. Owing to the magnitude of the undertaking and the unceasing demands upon his time and energy which his philanthropic and religious work involved, his Lordship for many years prior to his death devolved the entire superintendence of the Shawfield works upon two of his nephews, but he continued to take an active interest in the commercial side of the business up to the very last, attending regularly in his office in West George Street, Glasgow. But although no longer resident in Rutherglen or concerning himself with the actual processes of chrome manufacture, Lord Overtoun was never unmindful of the royal burgh with which his family fortunes had been so happily associated, and whose ancient motto *Ex fumo fama* derived a new and substantial significance from the Shawfield chemical works. Among his many benefactions were a Public Park and an Institute, with reading-room, gymnasium, baths, etc., and for many years he maintained at his own expense a Bible-woman, a Scripture-reader and a trained nurse.

Preaching from Romans xii. 2 on the Sabbath following his Lordship's passing away, a large number of distinguished Presbyterian divines observed that seldom, if ever, had the Apostle's pregnant epitome of the Christian life been more nobly exemplified than in the life of Lord Overton. Nor was this less than the truth concerning this exceedingly rich man who had now undoubtedly entered the kingdom of Heaven. Not by any means slothful in business, religion and philanthropy were the chief outlets of his Lordship's marvellous activity. On these departments of thought and life he bestowed unceasing attention. One of his published addresses contains these striking words: "I feel strongly that everyone in a community is bound by the highest obligations, whatever his position be, to try to live, not for self alone, but for others and to seek as he best can to promote their welfare." His parents by precept and example had laid the foundations of a profoundly religious character, to which was added a note of sincere personal conviction born of the great revival movements of last century. It was during the revival of 1859-60 that his first deep religious impressions were received, deepened as they were by the revival influence of Mr. D. L. Moody in 1874. Through the guidance of that great American evangelist, John Campbell White (as he then was) was brought prominently out as a leader in evangelical Christianity in Scotland, a position

he held through his days of exalted honour to the last. Both at Rutherglen and Dumbarton he was, in his youth, a Sabbath school teacher. He was an elder in the United Free High Church, Dumbarton, and down to the last he conscientiously discharged the duties of the office. The Bible class he conducted for nearly forty years was a remarkable organisation which, from small beginnings, had latterly a roll of 600 names.

It would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of the part played by Lord Overtoun in that branch of the Church of Scotland with which he was all his life associated. He was for more than a generation a prominent, though as a rule silent, figure in the General Assembly of the Free (afterwards the United Free) Church, sitting invariably as a representative elder from the Presbytery of Dumbarton. Save in one important respect, hereinafter to be mentioned, he figured chiefly as convener of the Livingstonia Mission of the Church, for which he had an hereditary attachment, his father having held that position until his death in 1884. Under all circumstances it was perhaps only to be expected that none should know better than Lord Overtoun the history and details of the celebrated Central African mission; but he never visited the stations, though often pressed to do so. Precluded by his numerous business engagements from taking a larger part in the administrative work of the Church, Lord Overtoun, like his father, preferred

to be known as the cheerful giver rather than as the Church leader. His great services to religion are to be measured in terms far more eloquent than frequent participation in debates and attendance at committee meetings. In all reverence, be it said, his Lordship furnished a heartening illustration of the motto, "Money talks". As we have seen, the spread of the Gospel in Africa held a special place in his affections, and he rendered memorable service to the cause of Christianity in the Dark Continent and elsewhere by his munificence, always coming to the rescue of threatened deficits in the funds—a contingency of unhappily frequent occurrence in the mission-field, its being a noteworthy fact that even in the darkest continents both money and the lack of money speak as loudly as in our own enlightened land.

One of the largest contributors to the Sustentation, or Central Fund, as it is now called, which is the financial mainstay of the United Free Church, Lord Overtoun's purse was ever at the disposal of any Church object, great or small. No humble Highland minister seeking aid for urgent repairs to church or manse ever approached the impressive portals of Overtoun House unbuoyed by hope, or departed thence without a remembrance of his noble host in the form of a treasured leaf from his Lordship's cheque-book. Is it, we ask, any wonder that his Lordship became almost universally venerated, nay beloved, and not for

himself alone? It seemed but natural that, on the death of the fifteenth Earl of Moray, he and none other should be chosen to succeed to the honour of annually seconding the election of the Moderator of the General Assembly. Like Lord Moray he generally graced the occasion by appearing in the uniform of the Lieutenancy, adding, as was often remarked in the press, "the only bright note of colour to the ceremonial of the day". It may be said in passing that the uniform was set off by his Lordship's figure infinitely better than it had been by that of his noble predecessor, who, though of so ancient a line, was a small man with bandy legs. Lord Overtoun, on the contrary, despite a lineage that was unaffectedly middle-class, had what may be described (and frequently in his case was described) as an aristocratic appearance. Fairly tall, with straight legs and an almost soldierly bearing (he had been an officer in the Volunteers), he wore a reserved, even a careful, composure of expression upon his well-chiselled features. He was one of the general trustees of the United Free Church, and as such his name appeared as the principal defender in the celebrated case of the *General Assembly of the Free Church v. Overtoun and Others*. Into the details of that celebrated litigation it is unnecessary here to enter. Suffice it to say that no one more than his Lordship deplored and condemned the fantastic interpretation of the law of trusts by which the House of

Lords, reversing the unanimous and better-informed opinion of the Scottish Courts, stripped the United Free Church of its possessions. As is well known, the injustice was remedied by Parliament by means of the Scottish Churches Act, in the passing of which Lord Overtoun rendered valuable assistance in his place in the Upper House. During the crisis his Lordship headed the Church's Emergency Fund with the truly magnificent subscription of £10,000, and this generosity was repeated only a few days before his lamented decease in connection with an appeal on behalf of dispossessed ministers and congregations in the Highlands. The Church was indeed the poorer by his death, for his testamentary donations, large as they were, did not at all represent the capitalised value of his annual donations, and so were bound, in the nature of things, to cause disappointment. Alas! How truly may it be said of the passing of the rich and great, *Pereunt et imputantur*.

But Lord Overtoun's generosity was far from being confined within the limits of denominational benefactions. Every organisation that had for its aim the promotion of evangelical Christianity (so long as it was an organisation) had in him a warm friend. He was the financial backbone of the handsome pile of masonry known as the Christian Institute, which is the headquarters of the Glasgow United Evangelical Association, etc. etc., and of its annexes, the Y.M.C.A. Club and

the Bible Training Institute, the latter institution being the joint gift of himself and his sister for the purpose of training young men and women as lay evangelists. By his princely munificence he obtained a commanding interest in most of the West of Scotland hospitals and homes. Indeed it may be said that the name of the religious and philanthropic bodies with which he was associated was legion. Besides being president of the Glasgow United Evangelistic Association, the Bible Training Institute and the Glasgow Medical Missionary Society, he was a vice-president of the National Bible Society, the Colportage Society, the Boys' Brigade, the Glasgow Royal Samaritan Hospital for Women, the City of Glasgow Native Benevolent Society, the Glasgow Royal Hospital for Sick Children, the Scottish National Hospital for Imbecile Children, etc. etc. As may readily be imagined, amid these multifarious activities his Lordship found it well-nigh, if not wholly, impossible to play the more private part of an individual gentleman, and indeed, so far as we have been able to gain information, from obituary notices of his Lordship and other sources, he was practically unknown in this capacity. No doubt it was one of the many sacrifices made by him upon the altar of his faith.

Personally a total abstainer, Lord Overtoun was an ardent advocate of the temperance cause. As a young man he had been associated with evangelistic and charitable effort among the slum

dwellers of Glasgow, and the harrowing sights he then witnessed convinced him that the Drink Traffic was the root of all the social evils of the day, besides being a grave economic burden upon the nation in a time of increasing competition for the markets of the world. As a justice of the peace for Dumbarton he took an active part in the affairs of the Licensing Court, where his vote and influence were always on the side of temperance, though he never allowed preconceived opinions to weigh with him to the complete exclusion of his official responsibility. Sabbath observance was another social question on which his Lordship felt strongly. In common with the best minds in Scotland he deeply deplored the growing tendency to encroach upon the sacredness of the Day of Rest, and took a prominent part in the opposition to the introduction of a Sunday tramway service in Glasgow. In this respect Lord Overtoun's attitude was misunderstood in some quarters. It was represented as unreasonable that anyone who was himself no inconsiderable employer of Sunday labour, and who thought it no sin to ride in his carriage on the Sabbath, should object to persons in less affluent circumstances riding in a tramcar. Those who argued thus failed, of course, to appreciate the clear distinction that underlay Lord Overtoun's point of view. He was no bigoted Sabbatarian where he himself was concerned. As the head of a great industrial undertaking he was fully

conscious that a considerable amount of Sunday labour is one of the inexorable demands of economic law, and as a successful business man he had certain legitimate private indulgences. On the other hand, a line must be drawn between such things and a public utility carried on for profit in the eyes of all men upon the Lord's Day. To countenance such a proceeding was to declare oneself as willing to barter the Scottish Sabbath with all its sanctified traditions and its beautiful quietude for the Continental Sunday, and against this his Lordship would set his face like a flint. The reasoning here must be so obvious to the intelligent reader that it calls for no further elaboration.

A staunch supporter of the Liberal party, Mr. Campbell White (as he still then was) loyally followed Mr. Gladstone on the Home Rule question. In so doing he had to part company with many old political friends, but his mind on the subject was quite clear, and to the last he remained convinced that the only solution to the Irish question was to give the people of Ireland the fullest measure of self-government compatible with the supremacy of the Imperial Parliament. So far from being influenced by the cry that Home Rule would mean Rome Rule, he inclined to the view that a generous measure of Home Rule would be the first step towards the emancipation of the Irish people from the tyranny of superstition and a potent aid to the spread of evangelical

truth in the distressful country. With his un-failing response to the appeal of any good cause he was a handsome contributor to the Liberal party war-chest, and when in 1893, during Mr. Gladstone's last administration, he was elevated to the peerage, it was universally recognised that never had an honour of the kind been more worthily bestowed. With the clearness of conscience and the simplicity that always characterised him he chose as the motto for his escutcheon the single word "Virtute", meaning "by virtue".

Lord Overtoun was not destined to be a prominent figure in the House of Lords, but it was noticeable that in the last few years he began to participate actively more in political affairs, following the dramatic revival of the fortunes of the Liberal party that set in at the General Election of 1906. At that election his nephew, Dr. J. Dundas White (now a well-known member of the Labour party), captured Dumbartonshire from the Unionists. As a thank-offering for this, one of the most notable Liberal victories in Scotland, his Lordship sent a cheque for £5000 to the Town Council of Clydebank for the avowed purpose of purchasing a public park for the great ship-building burgh.

In local affairs Lord Overtoun gave lavishly of his time and money. In 1890 he was elected to the Dumbarton County Council, and on the resignation of his uncle, Mr. Mackenzie of Caldarvan,

he was unanimously chosen convener, a position he held to the last. A Deputy Lieutenant for Dumbartonshire since 1884, on the death of Sir James Colquhoun of Luss, 5th baronet, in 1907, he was appointed Lord-Lieutenant of the county. For the new duties imposed on the Lieutenancy by Mr. (now Viscount) Haldane's Territorial Army scheme he was peculiarly well fitted by reason of his former connection with the Volunteers, and though opposed to militarism he was always a keen advocate of the physical training of the nation's manhood. In the burgh of Dumbarton, to which Overtoun is adjacent, his Lordship took a special interest. The College Park on which has been erected the truly monumental municipal buildings, was one of his many valuable gifts to the town. But, as we have seen, his charity was very far from being restricted to local objects. Appeals for help poured in upon him in a daily torrent from all quarters. To all he gave personal attention and judged each claim with that shrewdness and painstaking which characterised him in other walks of life. In all he did and gave he felt his personal responsibility. What he spent in private charity will never be known.

No man, however successful or generous, can expect to escape criticism, and in Lord Overtoun's case the outstanding position he occupied in Church and State made him an inevitable target for certain others of his countrymen who

had been less fortunate or less deserving in their lives. A number of damaging accusations were collected with careful ill-will by the late Mr. Keir Hardie and other agitators of the Labour party, and the collection culminated in 1899 in an attack which caused his Lordship and his Lordship's friends great distress. His Lordship, indeed, was deeply shocked, as were his friends. Not the least part of their distress was undoubtedly due to the extreme publicity achieved by the agitators, so that the affair became a matter for urgent discussion and comment throughout all Scotland. In the April of that year a strike—fomented in all probability by the aforesaid malcontents—occurred at Shawfield chemical works, and the cause of the strikers was taken up in the columns of the *Labour Leader*. Pandering to the public appetite for sensationalism, Mr. Keir Hardie published and afterwards reprinted in convenient pamphlet form a series of articles on the conditions of labour at Shawfield. It was therein alleged—

1. That Lord Overtoun's employees were paid at the rate of 3d. to 4d. (threepence to fourpence) per hour.
2. That they worked twelve hours a day, with no time off for meals.—
3. That many of them also worked seven days per week.
4. That the manufacture of chrome was exceedingly deleterious to health, workers

contracting abscesses which were familiarly known as "chrome holes".

5. That sanitary conditions at the works were well-nigh as bad as they could be, and that it was even doubtful if the Factory Acts were being complied with.

These disclosures created a most painful impression, the more so in that they were apparently true in the main and therefore could elicit no substantial and categorical denial from Lord Overtoun. His Lordship was accordingly compelled to suffer for the most part in silence, which he did. At the same time it was with justice recognised by the majority of his fellow-countrymen, who displayed a notable exercise of charity upon the trying occasion, that Keir Hardie and his associates were animated less by a desire to benefit the Shawfield workers than by eagerness to calumniate one who deservedly stood high in the esteem of his fellow-citizens. Isaiah has said that in the sight of God all our righteousness is as filthy rags, but to the better and more respectable kind of person the public human display of a man's righteousness in this light, when undertaken by another man, amounts to a piece of uncalled-for malice. The unscrupulous character of the attack may be judged by the fact that one of the "eye-opener" pamphlets, as they were styled, contained a grossly objectionable and wholly irrelevant personal reference to a minister who

had publicly protested against the *Labour Leader's* aspersions on Lord Overtoun. An interdict against the circulation of the pamphlet was therefore obtained from the Courts. Unluckily it was a simple matter for the Labour party to reissue the self-same pamphlet with the offending passage removed. As his Lordship did not see his way to denying the accusations, his friends were unable to take the necessary steps for their suppression. As has already been said, Lord Overtoun maintained a dignified reticence in the face of the malicious campaign. He took occasion merely to point out that he had no personal knowledge of the matters in question, as, owing to the heavy demands of his religious and public activities and his absorption in the commercial side of the business, he had not for many years taken any part in the management of Shawfield works, and this apparently even when a strike of workers was in progress. It was characteristic, however, of his lordship's energy and judgment, that once his attention was publicly directed to the state of matters, no time was lost in effecting improved conditions at Shawfield in regard to wages, hours, Sunday labour and the health of the employees, and it is impossible to acquit the Labour party of unworthy, even mischievous motives, when one reflects that the same results might have been secured without either scandal or offence by means of a courteous and private communication to his Lordship.

Happily, the outbreak just then of the South African War diverted public attention from Shawfield, and the regrettable affair was soon forgotten in that wider field of interest. During the War Lord Overtoun, though he had felt grave misgiving at the course of policy adopted by Lord (or Sir Alfred, as he then was) Milner, which he regarded as calculated to provoke a conflict that was probably inevitable, warmly seconded every patriotic effort. In this connection it was noted as a remarkable coincidence that the same issue of the newspapers which announced the passing away of the great Christian philanthropist contained the news that his former traducer, Mr. Keir Hardie, had arrived at Johannesburg and had been obliged to obtain police protection owing to showers of rotten eggs, tomatoes and other vegetable missiles directed against his person by the loyal inhabitants of the Gold Reef city, who thus evinced their very natural abhorrence of the Labour leader's unpatriotic conduct during the time of the Empire's need.

As a mark of respect to his Lordship's memory the day of his funeral was made an occasion of public mourning in the burgh of Dumbarton, all work being suspended during the progress of the obsequies. The late peer having been (as above stated) Lord-Lieutenant of the county, the funeral was of a semi-military character. A procession fully half a mile long, in which members of all

Presbyterian denominations were represented, followed the body to its last resting-place in Dumbarton Cemetery, where a short service was conducted by the Rev. John MacNeil (the celebrated evangelistic preacher, who had long been one of Lord Overtoun's protégés, and whose humorous sallies from the pulpit had made him famous throughout Scotland), and a firing-party of the 1st Dumbarton Artillery Volunteers discharged three volleys over the grave.

By his will Lord Overtoun left £23,000 to the various schemes of the United Free Church, £12,500 to the Glasgow infirmaries, £11,000 to the Glasgow Evangelistic Association, £2000 to the National Bible Society and a large number of smaller bequests to other benevolent objects, totalling in all £63,000 in the cause of charity alone.

Friends, be frank ! Ye snuff  
 Civet, I warrant. Really ? Like enough !  
 Merely the savor's rareness ; any nose  
 May ravage with impunity a rose ;  
 Rifle a musk-pod and 'twill ache like yours !  
 I'd tell you that same pungency ensures  
 An after-gust, but that were overbold.  
 Who would has heard Sordello's story told.