

GEORGE LESLIE WATES

1884-1958

**Address**

given by The Reverend H. E. EBURNE, B.A.

at the

**Thanksgiving Service**

in

Commemoration of the life of

**GEORGE LESLIE WATES**

at the

Lewisham Congregational Church

19th February, 1958

*“Lift up our hearts, O Lord, to the world invisible,  
which is our home, so that, in fellowship with the  
High Company of those who have gone before us,  
we may find courage and strength for our tasks  
here on earth.”*



*Portrait by Sir Gerald Kelly, P.P.R.A.*

**WE** come here this afternoon to praise God—as indeed is the only thing we may do as we come into His house. We come to praise him for the life and work—and the personality—of George Leslie Wates, and we come to express to Mrs. Wates and to her family the sympathy of this congregation and of many other people. We would not intrude into the intimacies of their grief, but we would desire that they should know that we too loved, admired and respected him, and we would buttress and sustain them especially the younger members of the family in all their future days by the knowledge of the esteem in which he was held.

There are many reasons for our regard for him. I suppose we cannot think of Leslie Wates without thinking in terms of his achievements, although I doubt whether that would be our final estimation—we should find that in the high quality of his personality. Yet consider for a moment these achievements. Born seventy-four years ago, in a time very different from that which he saw before he passed on, the son of devoted and independent thinking parents he spent his early days in this neighbourhood, worshipping with his parents in this Church, absorbing the simple, clear cut philosophy of his father, and occasionally accompanying his mother as she took part in Mission work not far from here. He was admitted solicitor with first-class honours when he was 21 and became a partner in a well known Woolwich firm of solicitors five years afterwards. In 1920 he passed on to the firm of solicitors to which in his later years he became consultant.

Then began a career of achievement. His connection with

Messrs. Johnson and Phillips arose in the first place out of his contacts as solicitor, continued until he became Chairman and Joint Managing Director. His association with the Woolwich Equitable Building Society with which his family had been connected since its inception also continued until he attained the position of Chairman. There were many other contacts in industry, the Canning Town Glass Works of which he was Chairman, member of the Executive Committee of the Cable Makers Association, Underwriting member of Lloyds ; and he was justly proud when he was made a Companion of the Institution of Electrical Engineers. Much more could—and indeed ought—to be said about these many contacts, for it is woefully inadequate to pass over these things in a sentence or two, and I must crave forgiveness for not mentioning them all, but there they are for all to know—achievement upon achievement.

There were other things. It was in the true tenor of his outlook on life that he gave his attention to public affairs. He was a Justice of the Peace ; he gave his mind and thought to the work of the Woolwich Polytechnic of which he was for three years Chairman of the Board of Governors and later President of the Union ; and there was that very considerable achievement when as Chairman of the British Electrical and Allied Manufacturers Association he assumed the responsibility for raising the capital sum for the Endowment of a Chair of Electrical Engineering at Cambridge. There are many people too, who will remember his work for the Woolwich War Memorial Hospital, and the Cottage

Hospital on the slopes of Shooters Hill which preceded it. It was one of his earliest interests, and I have heard of many incidents which showed detailed and indefatigable work for it. So we could go on, but here again many things—some of them unknown to the general public—must be left out.

I have talked of achievements, and of these achievements he himself was aware, with a kind of gratified appreciation which somehow stopped at the edge of pride. “ I am entitled to no credit ” he once wrote ; but you and I would not agree with that.

For to him there was something else. Possessions came his way and I think he loved good things. He loved, as indeed do his children, the home he made at Rowhill Grange. In the days of his illness he spoke of his contentment to be with his own folk, the trees, flowers, lawns and quiet and peace. Yes ; he had good possessions, but if there was one thing he knew, it was, to quote the old writer of the book of Proverbs, that “ A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold.” A good name! I have been privileged to see some of the many tributes which were paid to him. It was a great word in the “ Times,” “ a gilt edged reputation ” ; there were other words : “ he was a man of consequence ” “ of fearless courage ” ; “ of great mental stature ” ; “ always made a considerable impact ” ; “ able to deal with big affairs ” ; so they said, and there were many such tributes. I became aware as I read on that they were all placing emphasis on certain things. They spoke of high standards, of how his

word was his bond, and they talked of his ability, and the word integrity was often used. That was it, he was a man of integrity, of probity, of uprightness. Those who were closest to him, and it is they who knew him best, used a simpler word, they said he was a good man. Someone who loved him greatly said his goodness was an endowment.

Am I drawing a picture of someone who was stern and austere? I hope not, because it was not so. No one can look at the picture of him painted by Sir Gerald Kelly and think that. No one who sat opposite him in board room or council chamber and noticed the kindly, somewhat quizzical, glint in his eye would think it. There was that side to him which made him approachable and—more still—made him able to approach others. He could do that, for he had a breadth of view, clear sight, and an ability to see the simple issue, which could influence people to work for a common cause. In his industrial concerns he could approach labour in a spirit of justice and fair play, “fair and reasonable, reasonable and sensible,” were his words. He could listen to an argument even if he could not accept it, and he could bring a stimulation of thought and action.

Go back a little. “A good name” we said. Yes; and there were some other words in that same old Book of Proverbs, “He that loveth pureness of heart, for the grace of His lips a king shall be his friend.” “The grace of his lips,”—we know, many of us here, how pertinently he could speak—even bluntly, forcefully, but from those same lips came words of kindly counsel. At the Woolwich Polytechnic he always

had regard for the welfare of the younger students, was always anxious that they should have opportunities, especially in the days when Junior Schools existed there. He could say things infinitely kindly and tactful. I cannot imagine him putting up with shoddy work or imperfectly carried out tasks, and yet there was an underlying patience especially with those who were less highly endowed than himself. He always had an interest in the underprivileged and assisted in the Borough of Woolwich both the Invalid Children’s Aid Association and the Council of Social Service.

While he took pride in many things, in his profession—as indeed he did—and, if I may use the word, in his craftsmanship, there was a real humility of spirit. He simply could not see himself as setting an example, or even as an exponent of the virtues he proclaimed. Yet he did proclaim them, and I remember well his distress when, after he had spoken at a meeting of young people about the values of industry, sound work and honesty of purpose, the Chairman of the meeting seemed not to accept these principles. But the humility of spirit was there. “I am quite unconscious of what you have written,” he wrote to me once when I had expressed my admiration, “but if it be true, I am overjoyed.” For this man of virtue was quite devoid of pomposity. No one could imagine it in him. He was Leslie Wates—and about him there were no frills.

I have spoken once or twice of the sense of pride he had, always, I hope, using the word in its proper meaning. I would use it again. For he had a great pride of family, a pride in

those who had gone before him and a pride in those children and grandchildren who were given to his devoted wife and him during their 47 years of married life, a married life in which each formed a perfect complement to the other. His children and his grandchildren loved him and I think his own children, with their love for him mingled a great respect. There exists a photograph taken quite recently of the whole family which I know full well everyone will treasure. In the intimacies of the home there is much which it would be an impertinence to disclose, but the children did run to him and he was never so happy as in their company. It may not be known to everybody that in the lovely grounds of his home he gave facilities to the Girl Guides and the Boy Scouts of the neighbourhood and concerned himself with their work, of which we are reminded by the presence of Scouters and Guiders here to-day. He was President of the Bexleyheath Boy Scouts Association.

I am well aware that I am placing his virtues high, but the virtues were there and they were high and they struck deep. He did not wear his heart on his sleeve and he was far too honest to make profession of that which he did not accept. In his early days he learnt to bring most things to the test of intellect. For him, I imagine, the will of God was not to be carried out in ceremonial worship. The way for him was to release a living stream of justice and to work righteousness in everyday life. But his understanding was profound. "It may be expedient" he once said to a young man who sought his counsel, "but what about your soul?" Thus he knew the

secret of things :—

“ And every gentle heart  
That burns with true desire  
Is lit from eyes that mirror part  
Of that celestial fire.”

“ I have the privilege ” he said “ to come from many generations of good men, nonconformists to whom it was almost automatic to follow what they believed to be Christ’s teaching in all their lives,” and he counted it a privilege ; and in that same way he walked—humbly.

Robert Bridges wrote :—

Let praise devote thy work, and skill employ  
Thy whole mind, and thy heart be lost in joy.  
Well-doing bringeth pride, this constant thought  
Humility, that thy best done is nought.  
Man doeth nothing well, be it great or small,  
Save to praise God ; but that hath saved all ;  
For God requires no more than thou hast done,  
And takes thy work to bless it for his own.

We have come this afternoon from our offices, our factories, our workshops, our homes, our schools. We go back to them to do our work the better, to live our lives the nobler, to walk with added graciousness because of the life, the work, and the high qualities of George Leslie Wates, and to pray that the light in which he now walks will be our light also.

We end as we began, Let us praise God.