PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

JAMES McMURTRIE OF RADSTOCK 1839-1914
A VICTORIAN PERSONALITY

BY THE RT. HON. THE EARL WALDEGRAVE

It is always difficult for a layman to speak to a learned Society. I am most honoured to be your President, but in no way qualified to read a paper to you on Natural History or Archaeology.

I notice, however, from the *Proceedings*, that papers have occasionally been about *People* and not *Things*. This seems to be the way out for me.

I don't want to speak about my own family, except to set the scene for McMurtrie's life, for Waldegraves have lived remarkably little in Somerset. Though Sir Edward Waldegrave was granted the Manor of Chewton in Somerset by Mary Tudor in 1553 and probably had a house there, I don't believe any other Waldegrave lived in Somerset till Harptree Court was bought in the 18th century. And they didn't live there long. My uncle, who was the 9th Earl, took up residence, the first Waldegrave to do so, in Chewton Priory in 1898, and my second daughter, born in 1934, was certainly the first Waldegrave ever to be born in that house, and almost certainly the first to be born in the Manor of Chewton.

My wife, who is learned in these things, has of late done a lot of research into my family's history, and has read the large mass of manuscripts and records which we are fortunate enough still to possess; much of it still at Chewton Mendip, though a great deal has been deposited at the County Record Offices both here at Taunton and in Essex. And amongst our papers are a great many relating to the remarkable man about whom I wish to speak this afternoon, James McMurtrie, who controlled the affairs of the Waldegrave Estates in the 19th century and without whose loyalty and ability I should be a great deal poorer even than I am today.

But I want to make it quite clear that it is my wife, not me, who has most thoroughly and methodically worked on these papers . . . put them all into date order, read them all, and made notes about them.

All I have had to do is to select some of her notes and string them together into some sort of a narrative. She ought to be reading this paper, not me.

My family started to rise for the second time in the 1680s when the then Sir Henry Waldegrave married the natural daughter of James II by Arabella Churchill, sister of the Duke of Marlborough, and was made up to a Baron for his pains.

His son James, part Stuart and part Churchill, born a Catholic, changed over to Protestantism when the Hanoverians arrived. George I made him an Earl and George II made him a Knight of the Garter, and sent him first to Paris and then to Vienna as his Ambassador. He lived on his Estates in Essex where he built a house at Navestock. His son James, the 2nd Earl, was also a Knight of the Garter, Governor to the Prince of Wales, Lord Warden of the Stannaries, Teller to the Exchequer in 1757 (more or less the same as being Prime Minister), and married Maria Walpole, a granddaughter of the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, and a niece of Horace Walpole. After Lord

Waldegrave died of the smallpox, she, Maria, married the king's brother, Henry, Duke of Gloucester. Her Waldegrave children were the "Three Ladies Waldegrave", her Royal children were Prince William Henry and Princess Sophia Matilda.

When James and Maria's daughter, Elizabeth Laura, married her first cousin, Lord Chewton, who became 4th Earl in 1784, there was a formidable mass of property and works of art in their hands. Strawberry Hill and all its contents (for Horace Walpole left everything to his great niece); Essex Estates; Somerset Estates; and a lot of Royal Gloucester stuff too.

But what goes up comes down, and after a sound but fairly undistinguished 3rd and 4th Earl, and a 5th Earl who got himself drowned at Eton at the age of 10, the 6th and 7th Earls, who cover the period from 1785-1846, really touched bottom. We won't speak of the 6th Earl. The 7th Earl, George Edward, in 1840, the year after James McMurtrie was born, married Frances, a Jewess who had been born Braham, the daughter of an Italian opera singer, and the widow of his illegitimate half brother. He, George Edward, didn't last long either, and died of drink in 1846. Frances then married Mr. Harcourt of Nuneham, and, when he died, she married her fourth husband, Chichester Fortescue, who later became Lord Carlingford. Frances died in 1879 but Carlingford survived her. It was Frances then, who in the early part of the 19th century, got possession of all Waldegrave property by marrying those two rascals; it was Frances who bought in 1850 "Mr. Jenkins's very neat seat in Chewton Mendip on an eminence near the road, built in a very elegant Gothick stile of architecture" (as Collinson describes it). (Mr. Jenkins had been the Dean of Wells), and it was James McMurtrie who helped her to rebuild this neat seat into Chewton Priory, the house which I pulled down. Frances never had any children by any of her four husbands, so I am not descended from her, and of course she was not a Waldegrave, but she seemed to like the name, because even when married to Mr. Harcourt and later to Lord Carlingford, she continued to call herself "Countess Waldegrave". But my great grandfather, the 8th Earl, who was an Admiral, never got possession of the Waldegrave Estates and works of art, because somehow or other Frances had acquired the lot, and so I suppose it was all right for her to stick to the name as well for good measure.

Now for James McMurtrie. As soon as Mr. Harcourt died in 1861, his widow Frances got the bit between her teeth and started spending money in a big way. She rebuilt Strawberry Hill, and started greatly to enlarge Chewton Priory, and she knocked two houses together in Carlton Gardens the better to entertain in London, and the money to do all this was to come from the Radstock Collieries. They had been managed during Mr. Harcourt's time by London lawyers, and a local agent Mr. Greenwell. In 1862 James McMurtrie came down from the North (he was born in Ayrshire) as "Head Bailiff" for the three pits at Radstock, Middle Pit, Ludlows and Wellsway. He was 23, and he hadn't been in Radstock long before the whole place went on strike and there were petitions for his removal. His chief job was to forward £2,000 quarterly to Frances or explain why not. He had to supervise the Priory building (the original estimates by this time had already been exceeded by 100%). He seems immediately to have clicked with Frances, for within a year, by 1863, Greenwell was gone, and young James, aged 24, was in charge.

Frances, of course, was living in Essex, in a house called Dudbrook (Navestock had

burnt down by then); at Strawberry Hill; and in Carlton Gardens; and Frances drove him hard to send the much needed money, and he in turn drove the men. His letters show that he was permanently embattled with coal merchants about prices, the railway company about terms, Stuckeys Bank about overdraft rates, and over and above all, with "the men", the miners.

After two years at Radstock, in 1864, the first of many domestic tragedies befell him, when his young wife Eliza Barrow Smith died giving birth to George, the first and only child of that marriage. But you couldn't put James McMurtrie down. He married two more wives, and had 16 more children. Frances was George's godmother and presented him with a drinking mug. She offered to enlarge a portrait of Eliza, and James was deeply touched by this.

At this point I think it would be appropriate for me to quote one of his letters in full. All these letters were written in his beautiful clear and legible hand. This one dated 4th February 1865 was written on deep mourning paper, and it shows how at this early stage his relationship with his employer was already a combination of business and really intimate friendship.

"Madam,

I this day passed to your credit at Sir Samuel Scott's the sum of £4,500.

The door in the drawing room at Chewton Priory respecting which I this morning heard from Mr. Fortescue, has been attended to.

I beg to enclose copy of a document which I promised to send Your Ladyship. It doesn't pretend to give exact details but contains much that is useful for comparison.

The Auditors have not yet come, but I expect them in a day or two, and I will request them to forward an abstract of the trade or profit and loss acount which is the only correct test of profits as it takes everything into account.

I have been procuring from my friends any portraits of my wife which they possess in order to select from amongst them the best one for enlargement. When I have done this I will forward it to Carlton Gardens.

I could not find words the other day to express my gratitude for this kind suggestion. I can only say that nothing else that Your Ladyship could have offered me would have been so much valued.

I have the Honour to be, Madam,

Your Ladyship's Most Obedient Servant

James McMurtrie

The Right Honourable the Countess Waldegrave."

I think this as well as any letter typifies James McMurtrie and the age he lived in; a most important man of business dealing direct with this great lady's bankers about a sum which today would be equivalent to about £50,000; a respectful servant, writing quite formally, about mending a door in the drawing room; a family advisor sending the accounts and explaining them, and sending some document which he thinks his principal ought to read; and in the same letter writing in such beautiful English and obvious sincerity about his gratitude for his employer having promised to enlarge a portrait of his wife who had just died. *This at the age of* 26. And *without* the benefit of a modern University education.

The more you look at James McMurtrie's papers the more you realise that he was

really doing the work of what today would be a whole large office or company. He was managing what in those days was a large and expanding colliery business. He was managing agricultural estates in Essex and Somerset. His employer, a woman, lived in London, Twickenham and Essex, and he acted as a personal assistant and confidential secretary. He dealt direct on her behalf with accountants, lawyers and bankers. Remember he wrote every letter by hand, there were no telephones, and no typewriters. He travelled by horse and trap and by the railways. Long journeys took a great deal of time, required many changes of train and were pretty uncomfortable. I don't known what his salary was at this time. But it was only £700 or £800 a year at the end of his career. He made it go a long way, bringing up 17 children and living in what we should today call a big house . . . South Hill in Radstock . . . about the size of the house I live in now at Chewton Mendip.

At this period of his life, in spite of his overriding preoccupation with coal, he kept a watchful eye out for other minerals. He wrote to Frances in June 1865:

> "I spent a long day at Edington on Saturday [this was one of the Manors we owned at that time] with the agent for the company who are agitating for a trial for coal south of the Mendip Hills. I am decidedly of opinion that the neighbourhood of Edington is the most likely place to put down a boring for coal, but it could be done rather more cheaply about half a mile to the southeast of your property than upon it".

and in the same letter he says

> "I devoted another day last week to Captain Bray's lead mining tract on the East Harptree property . . . The St. Cuthbert Mining company are likely to apply shortly for the lease of another tract."

There were also references to lead and calamine (zinc) at Green Ore and Priddy.

Ownership of mineral rights at Harptree became a recurring problem. Important documents had apparently been destroyed in a fire at Lincolns Inn, and neither the rights of the Duchy of Cornwall nor those of the Waldegraves could be defined. Much legal advice was taken, some from Mr. William Rees-Mogg, but no conclusions were ever arrived at, so James McMurtrie firmly gave short term licences to speculating explorers in case anything significant might turn up. Many tried, and farmers complained of damage, but nothing valuable was found.

Although he lived to be 75, by 1867, aged 28, he was a little worried about his health, "nervousness and over-action of the heart". However, on March 5th of that year he married again and took a holiday. This second wife had 13 children, 6 of whom died at various intervals, and was the mother of Mr. Hugh McMurtrie whose daughter Audrey Widgery is here with us today.

This was the period, the 60s and 70s, in which Trades Unionism was beginning to emerge, the time of the first Factory Acts and Safety in Mines Acts. President Calvin Coolidge was once asked what he thought about Sin, and he replied "I'm agin it". This was James McMurtrie's attitude to the first beginnings of social legislation, and if it hadn't been his attitude he wouldn't have been so typical of his time and position as he was. Of course he was fighting a losing battle, but how hard he fought against the Mines Bill. Here is a typical, vigorous letter dated December 1872 to Frances. He is delighted to hear that the strikes are spreading to London. Now we shall have an outcry about the trades union tyranny. Let me quote the letter:

"My Lady,

I will get to Strawberry Hill on Wednesday and will reach Twickenham Station from Reading at 11.45 and must leave again at 3.41 pm. going home via London.

I have read with much interest the leader in the Morning Post on the subject of Trades Unions and I entirely concur in the conclusions at which it arrives. I have watched with *unmixed satisfaction* the progress of the strikes amongst the policemen, postmen and gas workers of London, and their effect upon the public mind.

So long as it was only a few thousands or tens of thousands of capitalists, managers and small tradesmen in the provinces who were being ruined in means or worried to death through the tyranny of trades unions, the press used its utmost influence in promoting them, philantropists speak of delegates as praiseworthy well-meaning men, and Parliament by legislation did all it could apparently to promote the objects they had in view.

But as soon as London begins to fear that its letters may not be delivered punctually, and when it is compelled to use paraffin candles instead of gas, there is an immediate outcry both from the press and the public demanding that trades unions shall be either restrained or put down."

In 1872 he was writing to Frances:

"I have just had returns taken . . . and I find we have 20 boys under 12, and these I believe I must discharge at the end of the year, for the half time and educational provisions are so complicated and onerous that I despair of getting them carried out. There are 102 boys of 12 years and under 16, and as their labour must henceforth end at from 2-3 o'clock in the afternoon instead of between 5-6 o'clock, the effect must be most damaging on the productive power of the colliery. But the law is there and we must carry it out."

But the rise in wages was pretty slow. In 1872 the miners were asking for half an hour's less work per day, and 1/- a *week* more wages, and an allowance of free coal. McMurtrie had to grant a 9-hour day in 1872. But by 1874 the trade had got very bad, and the coal prices had fallen by 3/4d. a ton. So the owners demanded an end to all these concessions and a 10% reduction in wages. The men refused, and were locked out. But at the same time as this, to us, extremely reactionary attitude towards labour, there was some very advanced thinking on amenity which we have hardly caught up with today. In 1873 McMurtrie writes to Lord Carlingford:

"The planting of the rubbish heaps is far advanced, and I have looked out every available bit of waste ground for the purpose, so that what is now both useless and unsightly will I trust some ten years hence be both ornamental and useful. The cost will be about £50."

When I was Chairman of the Forestry Commission, in the 1960s, we thought that we were being terribly up to date by planting up mine tips in the South Wales Coalfield. Old James had been at this 100 years before! At the same time as he was planting up these tips in Radstock, he was agitating for an underpass under the level crossing. But it takes more than 100 years to get anything out of a partnership of Railway Company and Road Authority, and the level crossing is still holding up the traffic in Radstock in 1970!

In 1875 poor James was bitterly upset by a serious collapse in the Tynings Pit.

> "The source of all this trouble", he wrote, "is treacherous ground in the pit side, an old sore left by those who sank the pit forty years ago . . . five times it has burst away . . . I would willingly have made any personal sacrifice rather than this should have happened"

and he practically offers to resign. He was not an inhumane man, and was much upset by this accident at Tynings which had cost two lives, but here the splendid relationship between him and his employer asserted itself, and Frances wrote to him a warm letter of encouragement and confidence, and there was no more talk of resignation.

It was in this year, 1875, that the bailiff at Chewton, a man called Mitchell, who had been ill for two years, died. James McMurtrie took on the administration of that estate, and immediately started borings for coal at Chew Down. He found the Chewton estate office in chaos; Frances knew just when to nag and just when to encourage, and gave him a large and elaborate dinner service.

New battles began to emerge at Radstock. He seems to have got on fairly well with Mr. Ward who was Rector until 1888, grand-son of Nelson's daughter Horatia, but when Mr. Gardiner became the Incumbent (and Gardiner was a high churchman) he became, after the trades unions and "the men", Enemy No. 2.

By now, the late 70s, James was really in charge of everything, and as Frances's extravagance mounted he had to become more and more a financier. There were no merchant banks in those days, and money had to be raised by the most complicated procedures of mortgages and loans of all sorts, and by selling things, not only works of art, but advowsons (the right to appoint clergymen), and licences to build (ground rents).

In 1879, Frances Countess Waldegrave, as she still called herself though married to Lord Carlingford, suddenly died. James McMurtrie was then 40. Now he was no longer employed by a masterful lady always demanding money, but by a broken-hearted widower distracted with debts, liabilities, legacies, annuities, mortgages, which he was quite unable to cope with. McMurtrie became both personal advisor and friend, he showed incredible patience and unfailing courtesy in dealing with Lord Carlingford's hypochondria and total despair in bereavement.

McMurtrie lost two wives and six children with a stoicism that allowed no break in his work, but he never seems to have got impatient with poor old Lord Carlingford's incessant wailing.

One of McMurtrie's few foibles showed up only ten days after Frances's death. What name should be painted on the coal trucks? He had already fought and lost a lawsuit with Beachim (who later changed the spelling of his name) who had called his company The Radstock Coal Company. So McMurtrie had had to use the rather cumbersome name "Frances Countess Waldegrave's Radstock Collieries". When Chichester Fortescue got elevated to the Peerage as Lord Carlingford and again when Frances died, there was much argument about what should be written on the side of the coal wagons, and finally they settled on this splendid but paint-consuming title of "Trustees of the late Frances Countess Waldegrave's Radstock Collieries". I remember when I was a little boy my uncle reduced it to three plain words, one word written on each panel of the little 4-wheel trucks you used to see in those days . . ."The Earl Waldegrave".

Untold troubles crowded in on poor James McMurtrie on Frances's death. Debts

and loans and I.O.U's not only of her own but of her rascal brother Charles Braham. The terms of her Will were quite absurd. Nobody knew what was "heirloom" and what was not (there appear to have been no Settlements). Everything was left to Lord Carlingford with remainder (if any) to Lord Waldegrave. But the coal trade was good, and McMurtrie felt more and more that the whole future depended on coal. Everything must be sacrificed to the development of the Radstock Coalfield. Strawberry Hill must go — it went in 1883; the pictures must go — and most of them went in 1885; the Essex Estates must go, etc., etc. But Chewton could stay for there was coal under Chew Down, and the Priory was a nice new house not likely to need much maintenance, and he could keep his eye on Chewton easily enough from Radstock.

Radstock of course continued to have its ups and downs. 1885 was a year full of troubles. There was a slump both in coal and agriculture — the Reynolds picture "The Three Ladies Waldegrave" was sent off to Christies. Lord Carlingford trotted off to Italy for his health, but got malaria there. Ten of James' children got the chickenpox that year, his wife got congestion of the lungs, she says as a result of the riots. There was an Election in Radstock and riots took place on Polling Day. McMurtrie was a Special Constable and took an energetic part. In a letter to Lord Carlingford he says:

> "Persuasion was useless, and force being the only remedy we adopted it with a vengeance, charging into the mob without fear, favour or affection, and distributing broken heads right and left."

He ended the day sore in every limb and minus his signet ring which had been torn off.

Next year, 1886, nearly all of his children were ill and one daughter died.

Carlingford lived on for nearly 20 years after Frances's death, till 1898. During all this time his hypochondria became more and more marked. And I don't believe anybody, now or then, could have disentangled all the financial mess. But it never got McMurtrie down, though in this period there is one of the only three occasions when he showed signs of defeat. One I have already quoted was when the Tyning Shaft collapsed. There was a second one connected with the collieries when some ill-disposed vet who had been sacked sued him for cruelty to a pit pony, which distressed him terribly, and this third time when he did feel sorry for himself and complained to Carlingford:

> "I greatly regret the time which has now to be given to mortgages and private financial matters generally which renders it impossible to do one's best for the Collieries and the Estate. I wish it were otherwise, for I often bring a weary head to bear on what ought to have my best energy, and I am warned by pressure on the brain and sleeplessness that I am running some risk of a breakdown."

There was no Frances to cheer him up and give him a dinner service, but only Carlingford wailing away, and at this juncture his second wife died leaving him with 13 of her children still alive, and George his first wife's child. He wrote to Carlingford in 1892 that his family were ill again, and one of his sons had just died.

> "It makes my heart ache to think of the past and contemplate the future . . . Ever since I was left alone more than 6 years ago, I have been struggling on under the cares of a large and delicate family and managing a not very easy home with the help of lady housekeepers who have all proved more or less failures, and my home life has not been as happy as it should have been."

And so he had decided to marry again, a Miss Anderson, of a Border family, daughter

of a Naval officer "who had been carrying on the work of the Nursing Society in Radstock", and who had "an Edinburgh accent which to me is not absolutely objectionable". He was now 53, this third wife bore him 3 more children, and survived him by many years. One cannot help feeling glad that he had another wife to support him again in the coal crisis year of '93.

One of the daughters of that marriage, Mrs. Richards, has painted a vivid picture of him as an old man . . .

"Weekdays, 6 a.m. in the office.

"Sundays, top hat and cutaway coat, and after Church feeding the blind pit ponies he kept in a field by the house.

"A learned man, quoting Shakespeare, Milton and Pope, though he was completely self taught."

That year James tried to get a 25% reduction in wages. "Hewers and breakers at 5/- per day of 8 hours, and some of the best men earning up to 6/- per day" was obviously far too much! Some men only chose to work 4 days per week at that rate. There was a strike. James furiously rebutted the idea that striking miners deserved charity:

"I warned George Coombs yesterday that if one shilling of the offertory money had been applied to the support of the miners on strike and their wives and families during the strike I would advise Your Lordship to withdraw your Easter subscription of £12, and I hope you would see your way to withdraw not only this but the free supply of coal to the Church, for why should you bolster up an institution which has done its best to ruin your Collieries?"

The Church in Radstock under Gardiner had become Enemy No. 2.

But the strike ended in November with the Roseberry settlement. McMurtrie called it "a terrible collapse", and I think he really did begin to lose a little self confidence after this strike, and perhaps realised that he was fighting a hopeless battle. Lord Carlingford expressed again his entire trust in him, and James replied "You speak in terms which far excel anything I could ever hope to deserve".

But Lord Carlingford in fact donated £700 to the relief of hard cases amongst miners' families. I don't suppose McMurtrie approved. The collieries did better in 1894. But in 1895 there were furious labour troubles and also agricultural depression, which meant that many tenants were giving up, or rents got badly into arrear.

Frances had gaily left annuities to her various friends and relations, and those got in arrear too. Poor James, what was he to do? He couldn't get the miners to accept lower wages, Gardiner was a thorn in the flesh, encouraging the men. By this time some of the annuities were 5 years in arrears, and some of the annuitants were clamouring pretty loudly. The January Colliery account was "the worst I ever had — a small balance of loss for the first time in 33 years." So in 1896 James McMurtrie cut his own salary from £350 a half year to £300 a half year.

The depredations of the London lawyer who had conveniently died and therefore didn't need to be prosecuted, now began to come to light . . .

"Considering the large sums of Your Lordship's money which formerly passed through his hands" wrote McMurtrie "there is great room for thankfulness nothing more happened." [It was about £1,000].

Incidentally, the new London lawyer, in 1896, used a typewriter, and this is the first

typewritten letter we see amongst the correspondence.

And then in 1898 Lord Carlingford died, aged 75, in Marseilles, and McMurtrie was his Executor. But some of Frances's relations, with their annuities in arrears, got to the Priory before McMurtrie could get there. Great was his indignation, and he now writes to his new employer, my uncle, to whom he has transferred his loyalty fully and wholly, to describe how the hungry annuitants had been rifling Lord Carlingford's papers in the Priory to see if they could find any evidence of mal-administration of the Estate:

> "It was pitiful to see how Lord Carlingford's papers, which in later years he had arranged with considerable care, had in the two days after the funeral, been thrown together in clothes baskets & carried into the locked room, to be huddled away any how in such wardrobes & drawers as came to hand."

At the end of a very long letter, and most important one for my family because it refers to and describes a great many heirlooms, it ends up like this: he wrote

> "I was glad to see the end of these five days, in which I was treated with an amount of suspicion & distrust to which I have been entirely unaccustomed . . . and I hope I may look upon it (this being Sunday) as a kind of Lenten exercise which Thomas-à-Kempis would have approved, & I hope this kind of Lent will soon be over.
>
> Believe me, very faithfully,
>
> Jas McMurtrie
>
> The Right Hon. The Earl Waldegrave"

Soon after my uncle succeeded, James was allowed to retire, but he was still retained as consultant. His eldest son George took over the management of the collieries which he retained till they were sold in the 1920s; and his son Hugh (Mrs. Widgery's father) took over the management of the Chewton estates. And I found him in harness when I succeeded to those estates in 1930.

This has been very much a layman's talk, very short of learned terminology. Just to keep my end up in this respect I will now describe to you the important gift James McMurtrie made to the Natural History Museum in London in '94, and which is still part of the collection. The *Daily News* reported that he parted with this collection with great reluctance, as it had become too extensive for him to give it the care and attention it required. It sounds like a life's work to a lesser man:

Plant remains from the Radstock Colliery:

36	Equisetacae
104	Filicacae
112	Lycopodiacae
10	Cycadacae
1	Coniferae (Sternbergia)
263	specimens, many very large!

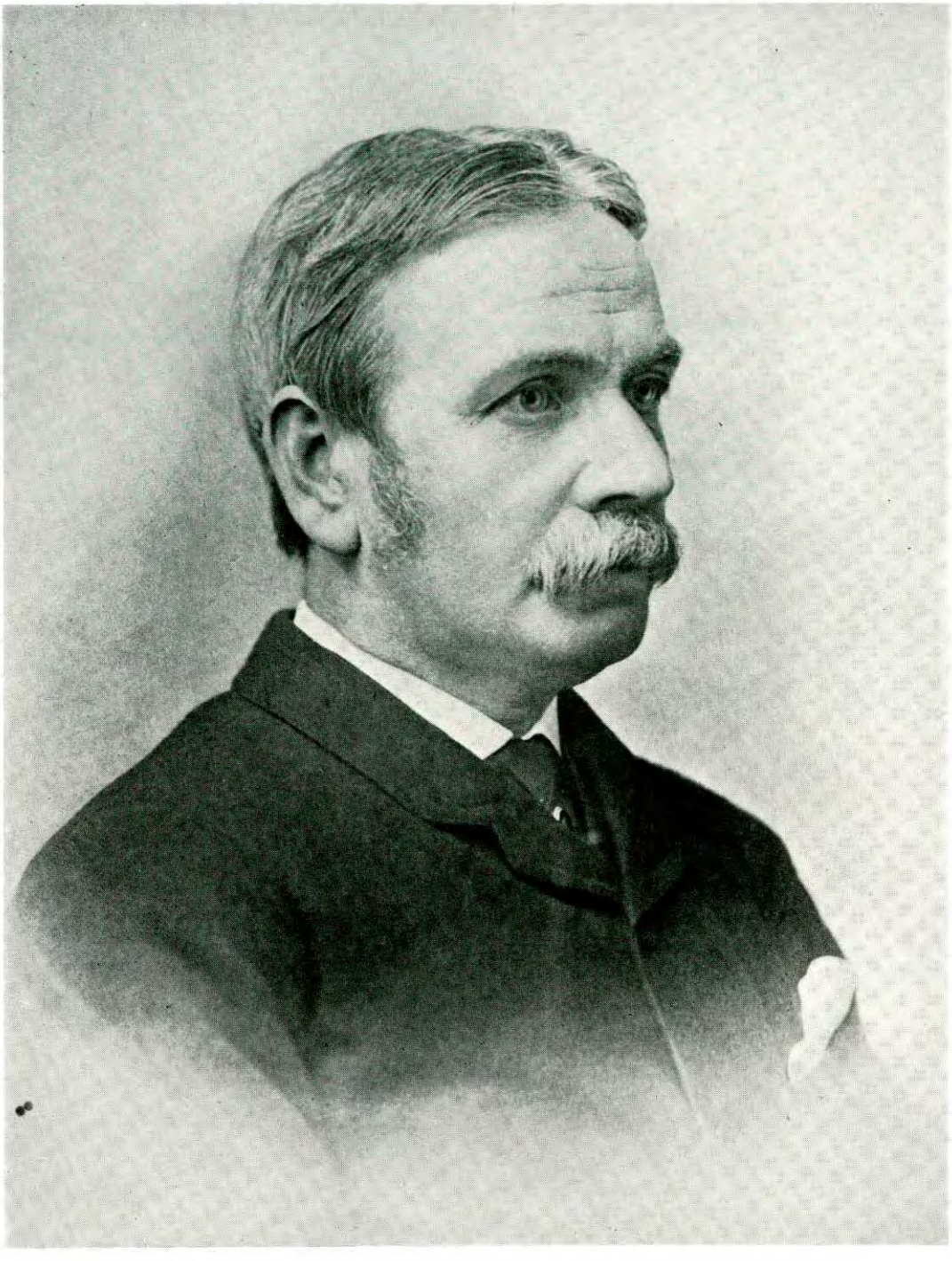
Horizon: Upper coal measures.

And one last point. Some of the papers he read to this and other learned Societies were written in 1873, 1875, 1878, years when he was in full work, and his office day started at 6 a.m. The others were mostly written after 1900 when his daily work was perhaps a little less heavy, though he was still much in demand as a consultant, and not only by the Waldegraves.

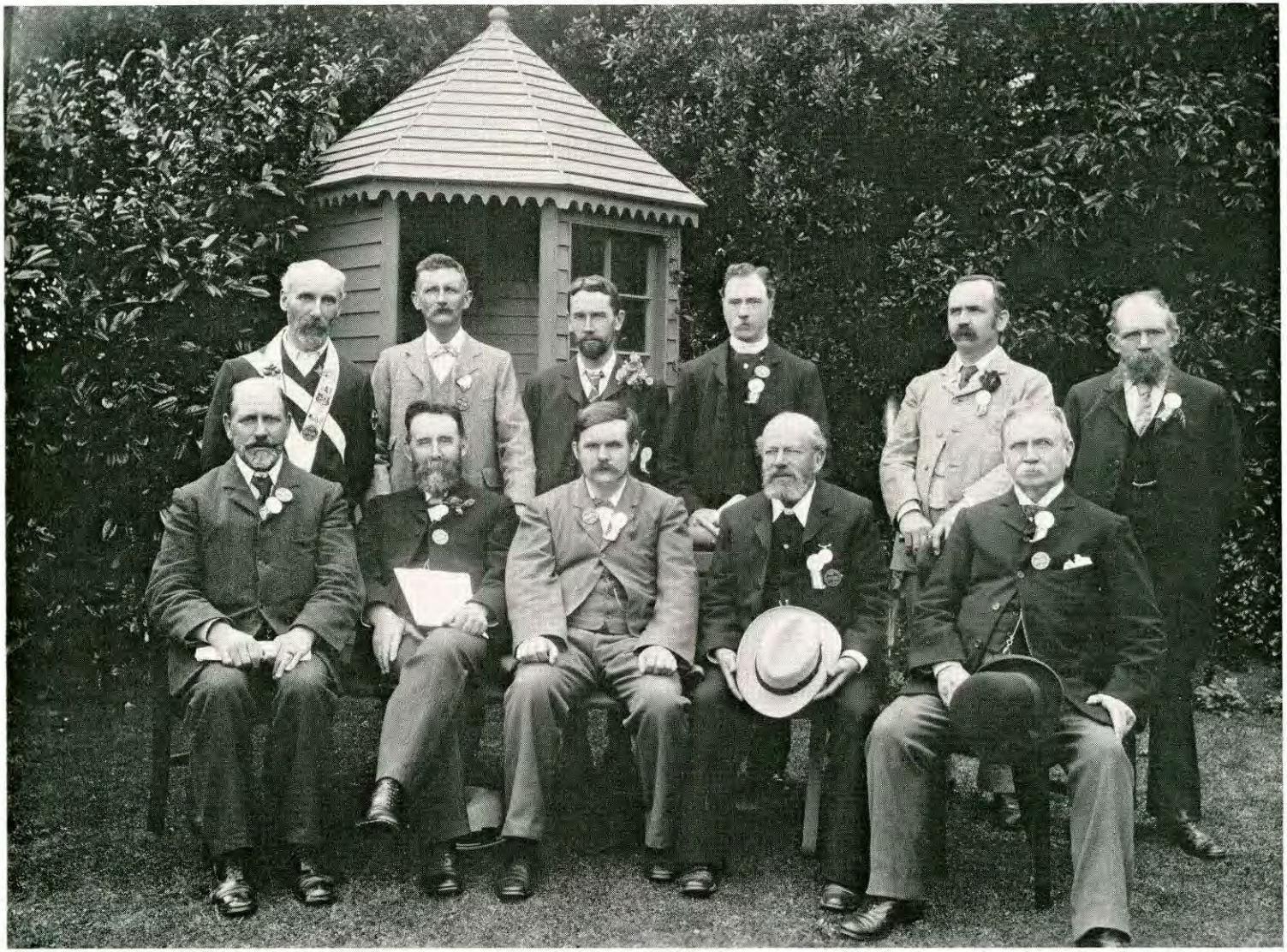
James lived his last years in Bristol, in a house he called "Waldegrave", and died there. His third wife survived him by many years.

On the 3rd February 1914, the year in which a long historical epoch began to draw violently to its close, James McMurtrie died aged 75.

Six of his sons were bearers at his funeral.



PL. I James McMurtrie, 1839-1914



PL. II Photograph taken June 26th, 1902 (Coronation of Edward VII)
Back row: S. Lloyd Harvey, Thomas Foster, G. E. J. McMurtrie, Richard Harvey, Alfred Perry, James Mitchard
Front row: S. Whitehouse, T. C. Gregory, G. H. Gibson, Dr. T. H. Worger, James McMurtrie