

**‘THROUGH THE WINDOWS OF
A BAPTIST MEETING HOUSE’
Religion, Politics and the Nonconformist Conscience
in the Life of Sir George White MP**

With the compilation of the *New Dictionary of National Biography*, under the general editorship of Colin Matthew, the contributions of many more of the Free Church men and women who helped shape nineteenth and twentieth-century Britain will be acknowledged. Among the debutants in the revised canon of great Britons will be Sir George White MP,¹ the man described by the *British Weekly* as the ‘foremost lay leader of English Nonconformity in our generation’,² yet a politician largely ignored by historians of Edwardian Britain.³ This is a significant oversight, for White featured prominently in Free-Church politics in the early twentieth century, chairing the Nonconformist Committee in the House of Commons and acting as a bridge between old-style dissenting Radicalism and the new(er) Liberalism of practical politicians like Lloyd George.⁴ Although ‘plain and modest’ with ‘no pretensions to brilliance’, White reached the top in business, politics and the Baptist denomination through the classic Victorian virtues of hard work, dedication and devotion,⁵ his success resting, in part, on his power as a speaker with ‘the enviable faculty granted to the best speakers of saying, and thinking clearly and strongly while he is on his feet’.⁶ This paper, which is based primarily on press reports of his life and death, will outline White’s achievements in religion, business and politics, illustrating the way these elements interacted, and looking, in particular, at the three areas in which religion most obviously influenced his political views: class relations, education and temperance.

George White was born on 13 March 1840, at Bourne in Lincolnshire, the son of Thomas White, a master shoemaker with about a dozen employees, and his wife, Mary. His parents were respectable, godly, principled Nonconformists, ‘who fought boldly against the shameful religious disabilities under which they then lived’.⁷ Thomas White, a deacon of Bourne Union Church and a Baptist by tradition, ‘looked upon his political faith as no small part of his religious faith’.⁸ His son attended Bourne Grammar School before entering the family business at the age of fifteen. The following year, 1856, he moved to Norwich to take up a position as a junior clerk in the shoe and leather firm of Tillyard & Howlett and, ‘after a very few months experience’ of the city, came to the conclusion that ‘my opportunities, for whatever they were worth, were here’.⁹ He took advantage of the educational facilities on offer to improve his prospects, spending the two hours before work each morning learning mathematics and languages from a Unitarian solicitor, J. W. Dowson, and in the evenings taking Greek lessons from the pastor of St Mary’s Baptist Chapel, the Revd George Gould.¹⁰

In 1863 White married Anne (1836-98), daughter of Henry Ransome of Norwich, forming a kinship link with his future partner, John Godfery [*sic*] Howlett

(1832-1914), who had also married one of Ransome's daughters.¹¹ 'Strong, wise, and tender in his home',¹² White had seven daughters and a son, George Ernest, who followed his father in service to Howlett & White, the Norwich Liberal Party, and St Mary's Baptist Chapel.¹³ His wife died in 1898 and, though he felt the loss keenly, it opened up a new phase in his life as he moved on to the national scene.

I

These bald facts help to place George White geographically and illustrate the environment which influenced his early years, but the key to understanding his motivation is religion. Deeply spiritual, business, politics, family and recreation were all secondary to and bound up with his religious convictions. A Puritan in 'his love for the Bible, in his reverence for the Sabbath, and in his intense passion for the redemption of humanity',¹⁴ he joined Bourne Union Church in 1856, when aged sixteen.¹⁵ On moving to Norwich he attended St Mary's Baptist Church, the chapel of his employers, and was baptized by the Revd George Gould, who was to become one of 'the greatest influences of his life'.¹⁶ He became a full member of St Mary's in 1857, and from 1883 until his death in 1912 he served as a member of the diaconate.¹⁷ Active in all aspects of chapel life, he took a special interest in the agencies of education and self-improvement: the Sunday School, the Adult School and also the local YMCA. Religion was central to his daily life. Along with his partners, he held brief prayer meetings in his office at the start of each work day, whilst in the 1870s and 1880s his wife, eight children and three servants left the house empty on Sunday afternoons to share his Sunday-school work at the Sayer Street Mission.¹⁸ Even in 1900 his 'day of rest' remained relentless: he walked the two miles from home to chapel for the Adult School at nine o'clock, read the lessons and gave out hymns at morning and evening services, and superintended a Sunday School in the afternoon.¹⁹

White first attended Sunday School at the age of four, and never ceased his involvement from then until his death. On his second Sunday in Norwich he took a boys' class in a mission Sunday School in a 'rough working-class neighbourhood', initiating a thirty-year association with the school.²⁰ In 1890 he became Superintendent of the large afternoon Junior School at St Mary's, whilst in 1905, despite suggesting that Schools 'lacked sufficient interest for the boys' and needed better teachers, he was elected President of the Sunday School Union of England and Wales.²¹

White's involvement with the YMCA, on the other hand, dated back to 1856 when he was instrumental in the formation of the Norwich branch.²² In 1859 he directed the first attempts at evangelical mission work consisting of 'free distribution of tracts, cottage meetings, and religious addresses out-doors',²³ and it was this village preaching, along with his activities in the debating society, which gave him practice in public speaking and marked his entry into public life.²⁴ He had all but retired from the Association when, in 1886, he summed up his attitude to the

movement as endeavouring to 'provide healthful recreation (both in doors and out), various agencies for the cultivation of the mental faculties, and . . . most important of all . . . to keep the spiritual life of the Association as its most prominent feature.'²⁵

This tripartite concern with recreation, education and spirituality was also central to the St Mary's Men's First Day Adult School, which White established in 1887 as 'one of the very best works of my life'.²⁶ White was devoted to the class, acting as President and Superintendent from its inception until his death, and taking a deep interest in the men, often acting on their behalf. This devotion was returned by the members who took 'a genuine pride in their Superintendent', trusting him with their grievances and troubles and believing that through him they influenced Westminster and did 'something to govern the British Empire'. Many of the men shared his radicalism and revelled in his uncompromising form of commitment politics - so much so that when members of the class heard that he had been called to order by the Speaker 'it was a great joy to them': 'Our cups would have simply overbrimmed if he had been expelled'.²⁷ However, in addition to its religious and educational functions, the Adult School was also a centre for practical self-help, providing access to a savings bank giving interest at 5%, a coal club, a sick benefit club, a Christmas goose club distributing around £200 every year, and a Self-help Society which collected £600 annually in two-penny subscriptions and paid an unemployment benefit of five shillings per week. White was particularly proud of the Goose Club, as many of the men had previously been in pub-based clubs where, he felt, 'the publican got the goose and they got the feathers'.²⁸

In 1899 he joined the Council of the Baptist Union, remaining a member until 1911, serving as Vice-President in 1902 and President the following year. White was only the third layman to hold this post and he utilized the opportunity provided by the two Presidential addresses to define the Nonconformist Conscience, both in relation to 'National Life' and, less famously, 'Child Life'.²⁹ 'Sir George White deliberately held that every Christian man *ought* to take part in politics' and his 'National Life' address was a manifesto for Free-Church political involvement.³⁰ A founder, in 1906, and first President of the Baptist Colonial Society, an organization 'dedicated to furthering Baptist principles throughout the British Empire',³¹ he claimed his earliest memories were of missionary meetings which seemed so much more exciting than the contemporary meetings, a loss of wonder he attributed to developments in modern transport and communications.³²

As Sir George White died on a Saturday, the first tributes to him were paid, not in the press, but in the churches and chapels of Norwich, where 'his own people, the Christian men and women of the city . . . [drew together] . . . in the unity of a common sorrow for the great man who, whatever his other activities were, in business, in politics, and in civic labour, was first and foremost a devoted Christian worker'.³³ Thus devotion to God was the central element in White's life, with his 'business as well as his politics . . . part and parcel of his religion'³⁴ and it is to

his business life that we now turn.

II

Regarded by many contemporaries as 'the father of the Norwich [footwear] industry',³⁵ George White's business career was a remarkable success. Employed by Tillyard & Howlett on eight shillings a week at the age of sixteen,³⁶ by the time of his death in 1912 he was Chairman and Managing Director of Howlett & White, chairman of the Standard Rotary Machine Company, and Chairman of the Baptist Fire Insurance Company.³⁷ His progress through the firm was steady but sure and, after four years as a clerk, he was appointed commercial traveller for the northern and eastern counties, returning to Norwich in 1865, aged twenty-five, to take over management of the shoe department, though 'on the distinct understanding that I should always be allowed to give time to public work'.³⁸ In 1875, despite having no capital to bring into the business, he became a partner and Tillyard & Howlett became Howlett & White. The firm converted to limited liability in 1899 with the partners, who now included the sons of White and Howlett, becoming permanent directors, and White assuming the role of Chairman and joint Managing Director.³⁹

Sir George was an adept businessman who took advantage of economic conditions, modern plant and the development of Norwich as a wholesale footwear centre to turn the firm into a nationally and internationally renowned producer of high-grade boots and shoes.⁴⁰ By 1910, Howlett & White could boast the largest shoe factory under one roof in Britain, with twelve hundred workers working on 150,000 to 200,000 pairs of boots and shoes per annum.⁴¹ Though they did well in the home market with the 'Norvic' ladies range, the firm was particularly effective in developing products, such as ladies fashion and sports footwear, for export to the Empire, Europe and South America.⁴² Furthermore, all of this success was a result of White's 'thrusting enterprise', for, as his partner, J. G. Howlett, attested, it was 'to his management of the firm's shoe trade that I attribute the subsequent rapid development of the business in this important direction'.⁴³

White maintained strong managerial control of his firm, kept most information in his head, and only began to relinquish total command with the conversion of the partnership to limited liability, a move which coincided with his entry into parliamentary politics.⁴⁴ A modernizer, he aimed to eradicate the home-based craft workers and garrett-masters by the introduction of new technology, new management strategies, modern efficient plant and a disciplined, semi-skilled workforce, regularly employed in well regulated and supervised factories.⁴⁵ Though he conceded that the factory system, with its 'extreme subdivision of labour' was imperfect and uninteresting, he was convinced 'that the change has been both for the moral and physical good of the work people', especially the eradication of St Monday (the practice, common among skilled craftsmen, of taking Monday off work to drink and socialize) and the imposition of time and work discipline which had brought 'an entire change' in the workman's character.⁴⁶

As the son of a master shoemaker and a friend of his father's skilled workers, White was very much aware of what the craftsman had sacrificed in the transition from home to factory. In return for the independence and skill of traditional craftsmen, he secured reduced and regulated working hours, stable wages and rational recreation. Howlett & White organized a works band, football and cricket teams, and a rifle club; in the second decade of the twentieth century they expanded their welfare provision to include a dining hall and in 1920 a pension scheme.⁴⁷ Yet for all his paternalism, within his factory White made sure discipline was strictly maintained. He kept personal control over wages, insisted on strict time-keeping - a time-keeper clocked workers in at the door, docking fifteen minutes pay if even one minute late - and on certain dress standards - women were not allowed to wear curlers or clogs to work.⁴⁸ Furthermore, discipline within a department was maintained by an overlooker who, according to a socialist critic, applied 'methods that would have shamed the overseers on a sugar plantation in the black slavery days'.⁴⁹ Although Holmes levelled other charges against the firm, such as lowering wages and employing women in male areas of work, ultimately he was less critical of Howlett & White than of many other local employers.⁵⁰ It does seem that White's management, whatever its faults, produced considerable employee loyalty and a generally happy work-force.⁵¹ This loyalty Jewson attributes to White and Howlett's leadership of many of the social agencies of St Mary's Baptist Chapel, which allowed them 'to serve personally, many of their workmen'.⁵² This combination of modernity and morality was also a feature of White's political career which drew inspiration from both God and his practical experience of business and the urban environment.

III

A 'man of clean-cut and consistent views, according emphatically with the political and religious ideals of modern Puritanism',⁵³ George White claimed he first became interested in politics in 1848 at the age of eight. His early influences included his father; the Revd George Gould; the Norwich Radical, J. H. Tillet; his father's workmen and the old Chartist artisans of Norwich, whose 'descriptions of the wrongs which the workers suffered, fired my young life . . . with an ambition to take my share in the fight for progress'.⁵⁴

Secretary of a Liberal ward organization at the age of eighteen, he became honorary secretary of the Norwich Electoral Reform Association two years later, heralding the start of a life-long commitment to the extension of democracy which included support for the widening of the county franchise and votes for women.⁵⁵ Always a radical, his first action as a municipal elector in 1868 was successfully to run a candidate against the Liberal party.⁵⁶ Earlier in the same year he began his political involvement with education when he joined the local branch of Joseph Chamberlain's Birmingham Education League. Elected to the Norwich School Board in 1874, he remained a member until its demise in 1902, acting as its

chairman for fifteen years, and then of the new Education Committee until his death in 1912. He first entered the Council in 1876, was raised to the Aldermanic bench some time before 1890, held the office of Sheriff in 1888, led the Norwich Liberal Party from 1886 to 1900, and served as a Justice of the Peace for many years.⁵⁷

Thus, by the age of fifty White dominated municipal politics, yet he seemed to show no interest in a parliamentary career, declining numerous offers to contest his adopted city in the Liberal interest. Publicly he claimed 'it is best not to stand for a constituency in which one has business or municipal interests',⁵⁸ but it is probable that two other factors, one personal and one political, strongly influenced his decision not to stand in Norwich. On a personal level it is likely that he did not wish to leave his wife and family, his final entry to parliament coming at the first election after the death of Anne, whilst politically there was never a time, before 1904, when his victory would have been assured.⁵⁹ It was the coincidence of the death of his wife and the retirement of his old political ally, Joseph Arch, which finally took White to Westminster, though not as the representative for Norwich. In 1900, the 'black year' for Liberalism, he was elected MP for North-West Norfolk, beating a prominent local Unionist by a margin of 476 votes.⁶⁰ 'To be perfectly frank', wrote the *Eastern Daily Press*, 'Sir George White did not possess at that time, and never fully possessed, any special knowledge of agriculture . . . But Mr White had views on land, and on many other subjects connected with the land, with which the majority of the North-West Norfolk electors fully agreed.'⁶¹ Unlike most elderly businessmen from the provinces who became MPs as the culmination of their civic career, he was an active parliamentarian who though he 'made no attempt at oratory . . . spoke with such knowledge and such sense, and showed himself a man of such sterling quality, that he carried far more weight than many who were more conspicuous'.⁶²

Yet despite his popularity and ability, White did not achieve ministerial rank. Hotly tipped to succeed Birrell as Secretary of the Board of Education in 1907, to the surprise and anger of many Free Churchmen the post went to Reginald McKenna.⁶³ Although his understanding of the education controversy and his willingness to find a solution might have made him a successful appointment, it seems likely that both his age (he was sixty-seven at the time) and his association with the radical nonconformists counted against him. He achieved some recognition from his own supporters in 1908 when, following a conspiracy involving fellow Norfolk MP, Richard Winfrey, 'the Nonconformist members unhesitatingly chose him as their Chairman in succession to Sir Robert Perks'.⁶⁴ In 1907 he was knighted⁶⁵ and three years later his adopted city made him an honorary freeman for his lifelong service to Norwich and his 'earnest and untiring labour for the upraising of the people, particularly in the advancement of education'.⁶⁶

George White often said that were politics ever to interfere with his religious work he would give up politics. Yet this was never likely to happen for, as one Tory critic suggested, he was 'in the habit of looking at all political problems as

through the windows of a Baptist meeting house'.⁶⁷ As a nineteenth-century radical dissenter, White subscribed to all the tenets of Newcastle Programme Old Liberalism, as articulated in his 'Nonconformist Conscience' address⁶⁸ - land, housing, temperance, imperialism, militarism, religious equality and education - as well as free trade, the righteousness of which he attributed to the 'beneficence of Providence'.⁶⁹ But his ideology was constantly developing, and by the Edwardian period he was an 'exponent of advanced politics . . . within orthodox limits', a close ally of Lloyd George and Dr Clifford, and a strong believer in 'the necessity of applying the principles of Christianity to the social problems of the day'.⁷⁰ As a result, he gave vigorous support to an extensive programme of municipal intervention, especially in monopoly cases or where health or morals were affected, close relations with emergent organizations to promote working-class parliamentary representation, trade-union rights, state insurance, opposition to privilege, and the limited redistribution of wealth within the market economy. Although many of these views could be described as new Liberal, or at least 'modern',⁷¹ the rest of this paper will address three areas from the old Liberal canon where White's religious and moral views most obviously influenced his political ideas and actions: class relations, education, and temperance.

White's views on class relations were undoubtedly radical by the standards of the late nineteenth century. Claiming affinity with the workers, by pointing out that he had started work as a waged employee, he was broadly in favour of unions 'because they were the surest means of defence, and where associated bodies of employers and work people could meet, disputes would yield to the beneficent influence of arbitration rather than the baneful power of strikes'.⁷² In his 1903 Presidential address, he encouraged his fellow employers to adopt a 'fair and equal' relationship with their employees and, though claiming it was impossible to override the wage laws of an industry, he was happy to suggest that 'there is no reason why, other changes working in conjunction, a proper subsistence level for the whole people should not be reached, and the scandal of some 30 per cent of the population living below that level be quickly removed'.⁷³ Adopting a strictly moral tone, he went on to assert that it was their duty:

to pay the best wages we can, to make the conditions of work reasonable and good, to be a court of appeal ever open to suggestion or complaint, to admit the right of combination - in fact to show there is a real difference between the mere man of the world and the Christian, and to set before ourselves the example of a Cadbury rather than a Penrhyn. When a church is prepared to discipline a rich deacon for grinding his workpeople as it would if guilty of larceny or drunkenness, then will more confidence be established between it and the toiling masses who now stand aloof from its ministrations.⁷⁴

Returning to the theme of income distribution in 1910, he suggested that, 'The Church of Christ would have to face the question of the more equitable distribution of wealth produced by modern industrial conditions. Plutocrats and millionaires

were the greatest enemies of the nation and of the Church'.⁷⁵ The historian, Stephen Koss, has described this passage as the 'crude . . . rhetoric of class warfare', but this is a naïve interpretation as White was simply repeating an established part of his political philosophy, and may even have reflected a generally held view within the Free Churches, for the *British Weekly* saw nothing exceptional in the speech. Its report included the sentence, 'plutocrats were the greatest enemy of Christianity at the present day', but without making any comment, and most of the rest of the report was taken up with 'a good epigram' and two platform jokes.⁷⁶ To White and many other Baptists, greed and avarice were morally indefensible and dangerous, encouraging distrust of the church and the middle class and spawning a materialistic and atheistic socialism. Faced with such a challenge, moderate redistribution in the form of pensions, insurance and leisure facilities was not confiscation, but sound business, sound politics and sound religion.

Important though his ideas on class relations were, White's main political contribution was in the field of education. In Norwich he achieved 'perhaps his best and most enduring work' by making 'the education of the children of the working classes possible, and even popular',⁷⁷ the number of children receiving an education rising from a little over 6000 in the early 1870s to 22,000 in 1910.⁷⁸ However, Sir George attained national prominence through his role in the resistance to the 1902 Education Act and is credited with first recommending the policy of passive resistance, which, 'coming from a man of such sound judgement and quiet temper . . . was at once accepted by a very large number of representative Nonconformists'.⁷⁹ Tireless in his commitment to the passive resistance cause, he chaired the Norwich Citizens League, saw his goods seized 'again and again', and addressed innumerable meetings, even in the most inhospitable environments.⁸⁰ Yet from the earliest days of the controversy he sought every opportunity to avert confrontation and secure a peaceful compromise. In 1902 he and Tory leader, Edward Wild, piloted a resolution through Norwich City Council, highlighting the main defects in the Bill.⁸¹ He took a considerable part in the negotiations leading to both the Birrell Bill of 1906 and the abortive Runciman Compromise of 1908,⁸² noting in the latter case that he had:

risked the educational reputation of a lifetime in the belief that this compromise will bring us considerably nearer to the national ideal than we are today . . . it should not be hastily concluded that many of us, including men like Dr Clifford and Silvester Horne, could lightly or without solid reason advise any compromise on a question for which we have fought so long and ardently.⁸³

However, although he was willing to make certain compromises, he upset some of his friends by declaring against the secular solution suggested after the failure of Runciman, asserting forcefully that: 'no system of education is complete which does not include religious training. The training of the child is the most important of all Christian work.'⁸⁴

In 1912, not long before his death, he was still urging the Liberal government to settle the issue and prevent the militants from withdrawing their support at the next general election. Personally he remained 'content to give a loyal support to Mr Asquith's Government, and to wait patiently for the victory that would have crowned his life',⁸⁵ a victory which, sadly for him, never came.

Education provided White with fame and a certain notoriety, but the issue which linked the religious, political and business strands of his career most completely was temperance. His advocacy of teetotalism was part of a lived experience, a way of life he chose for himself in the light of his exposure to the worlds of the slum, the commercial traveller and the skilled artisan of the pre-industrial economy.⁸⁶ Although he believed temperance was 'at the root of social and political reform',⁸⁷ this was neither simple 'old Liberalism' nor an attempt to blame the working class for their own misery. Rather, he saw a reduction in alcohol consumption as part of a general policy - including pensions, state insurance and housing reform - designed to create a more efficient workforce, increase the spending power of the working class, raise living standards generally and attack the power and privilege of Conservative and landed interests. As with education, he avoided the fundamentalist position and never 'voted against a Temperance Bill because it did not go far enough'.⁸⁸ He was an early member of the United Kingdom Alliance, became Secretary of the Norwich branch in 1872 and a Vice President of the national body by 1909. In 1903 he succeeded W. S. Caine, a fellow MP, as President of the Baptist Total Abstinence Society, serving until his death in 1912, when his other temperance-related positions included member of the Council of the National Temperance League and Vice President of the Central Association for Sunday Closing of Public Houses, as well as a number of local presidencies and chairmanships.⁸⁹ In 1900 he launched the 'Million Pledge Crusade', adding many hundreds of thousands to the temperance roll.⁹⁰

Regarded as second only to Sir Thomas Whittaker in his knowledge of the drink question, his general philosophy was related in the course of his 'Nonconformist Conscience' address. Although he saw a moral and social dimension to the drink question, believing it to be the chief cause of divorce and absence from church,⁹¹ at root his interpretation was economic. More damaging to the country's resources than war, greater in cost than all local and national taxation or the rental value of all the country's houses, shops and hotels, and, due to its small wage fund (White instanced the net profits of one Brewery as four times the total wages, whereas he was paying wages totalling five times the net profit)⁹², responsible for reducing the consumption of useful goods by £70,000,000, drink undermined the efficiency and consumption of the individual worker and led to the loss of fifteen per cent of his work time - a figure more serious in its effects on the economy than 'the worst strike which ever happened'.⁹³

He also held very strong views on the organization and ownership of the drink trade, including total opposition to:

municipal trading in drink, because nowhere in the wide world, under whatever conditions it has been sold, do you find its sale free from the crying evils of drunkenness, poverty and crime, and I protest against being made partner in a business which inevitably produces these results.⁹⁴

Rather, if the state was not going to ban drink altogether, it should at least attack the tied house monopoly and set up counter-attractions such as reading and recreation rooms with light refreshments. But he was sanguine about the possibilities of major reform, seeing the drink interest as part of the web of privilege supported by the Conservative party and the House of Lords, and observing in 1901 that, even though bishops were supporting reform, 'whilst Lord Salisbury was at the head of the Government no temperance legislation could be undertaken . . . consequently all Christian people should pray for his removal'.⁹⁵ He was particularly virulent in his attack on the Conservative Government's 1903 Licensing Bill, which would introduce compensation for a lost licence, a morally corrupt idea, as:

no man or body of men can have vested rights in wrong doing, and if we give the least quarter to this demand upon public funds, we shall place the present system as an intolerable yet irremovable burden upon the generation to follow us, and allow the physical and moral fibre of the nation to go down before it.⁹⁶

Along with the majority of Nonconformists he supported local option, in particular because of his awareness of 'how much bad laws have done to tempt men to their own ruin, and how much happier and more powerful the great bulk of the working class (the most of whom are sober and thrifty) would be if they were not dragged down by the few drunken and dissolute among them'.⁹⁷ However, despite a piece of Scottish legislation in 1910 (which White described as 'making people sober by Act of Parliament'⁹⁸), the Edwardian period was one of setbacks for the temperance cause and, as with education, White died without seeing either a major revision of the 1904 Act or the introduction of local option to England.

IV

George White made his last public appearance in Norwich in 1911 at a meeting addressed by the Irish Nationalist leader, John Redmond.⁹⁹ The following month he was found to have lung cancer. In December he wrote to Shakespeare that for 'some time past I had longed for time for more thought and reflection, and had determined to embrace the first favourable opportunity for retiring from Parliament, but my Heavenly Father can see into the future and knows all the difficulties, and had, therefore, taken it into His own loving hands'.¹⁰⁰ In March 1912 he received radium treatment, but died at home on Saturday, 11 May 1912.¹⁰¹ On the day of his funeral, 'Norwich seemed to be in general mourning' as, in 'one of the most extraordinary manifestations of sympathy and public interest ever witnessed at a

funeral in Norwich . . . the windows of shops and private houses . . . were shaded; and thousands of citizens who did not themselves attend the obsequies watched from afar with an air of grave and eager concern'.¹⁰²

A substantial congregation packed into St Mary's, including the Lord Mayor and full Council, council officials, representatives of schools and the Technical Institute, employees and business colleagues, and many Free Churchmen, as well as the Anglicans, Archdeacon Pelham and Canon Hay Aitken, Canon Fitzgerald, head of the Norwich Catholics, and 'many even of his political opponents'.¹⁰³ All of the leading Baptist divines attended, illustrating the central position in the denomination of George White and St Mary's.¹⁰⁴ Whilst the Revd Glynn Edwards, pastor of St Mary's, officiated at a private service at White's home, two of his predecessors, J. H. Shakespeare, Secretary of the Baptist Union, and the Revd Thomas Phillips, minister of Bloomsbury Chapel, performed the duties at a public service in St Mary's. At the graveside prayers were said by White's close religious and political ally, Dr John Clifford, with Principal George Gould, son of former St Mary's minister, the Revd George Gould, delivering an address.

Following the service, most of the congregation went to the Market Place to meet the funeral cortège.

The scene at this point of contact was wonderfully impressive. Thousands of people, bareheaded, were standing along the sides of Guildhall Hill, and blocking the pathways of London Street. The members of St Mary's First Day School fell in at the head of the procession. Then came the hearse, upon which the coffin was obscured from view beneath a mountain of magnificent flowers.¹⁰⁵

Close on three thousand people were present at the Rosary Cemetery¹⁰⁶ for the internment as 'in thought and feeling a whole city gathered upon the open vault'¹⁰⁷ to pay their last respects to Sir George White, the city's foremost Christian, businessman and civic leader.

White's life was a success story of Smilesian proportions with significant achievements in the worlds of business, politics and religion. His faith in God informed all of his actions and gave a very particular slant to his political views - especially his attitude to class relations and the duties and responsibilities of wealth. Conversely, in his period as President of the Baptist Union, he thrust politics back into a denominational world grown quiet and a little confused since 1886, reasserting the righteousness of the Christian's civic duty. In Parliament he formed a bridge between the old Radicalism of High Victorian dissent and the new Liberalism of Lloyd George and the welfare reforms of 1908-11. In his support for state insurance, pensions and municipal socialism he showed that nonconformist businessmen were not all like Robert Perks or Richard Holt, fixated by the nineteenth-century issues of temperance and education and suspicious of state intervention. As this paper has shown, White had a very strong commitment to these issues - temperance providing him with a way of life, whilst education secured

his entrée into the corridors of power, at least as a visitor - but they were by no means his only political interests.

Despite his considerable achievements, his failure to secure a government post after 1906 has led to his historical marginalization at the expense of successful younger men with similar views, like Lloyd George, and the older die-hard Radicals, like Perks, who have come to typify middle-class nonconformist opinion. White's willingness to accept new ideas may have been exceptional, but his election to the Chairmanship of the Nonconformist Committee in Parliament seems to suggest that his amalgam of old and new Liberalism reflected the views of the majority of dissenting MPs, justifying his soubriquet of 'leader of Nonconformity'. His importance to both the Liberal party and the Baptist denomination have been largely overlooked and his inclusion in the *New Dictionary of National Biography* is a somewhat belated recognition of his historical significance.

NOTES

- 1 Barry M. Doyle, 'White, Sir George, (1840-1912)' in H. C. G. Matthew (ed.), *New Dictionary of National Biography* (forthcoming).
- 2 *British Weekly* 16 May 1912, p.159.
- 3 White features quite prominently in D. W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience*, 1982, especially in relation to education, but his contribution is dismissed or misrepresented by the late Stephen Koss, *Nonconformity in Modern British Politics*, 1975, pp.116, 118, whilst G. L. Bernstein, *Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian England*, 1986, scarcely mentions White in a book which utilizes Norwich as a case study - although he does appear in the same author's 'Liberalism and the Progressive Alliance in the constituencies, 1900-1914: Three case studies', *Historical Journal* 26, 1983, pp.617-40. White's central position in Norwich politics is touched upon in Barry M. Doyle, 'Business, Liberalism and Dissent in Norwich, 1900-1930', *BQ* 35, 5, 1994, esp. pp.247-8. His economic contribution has been recognized by business historians, see Keith Brooker, 'White, Sir George (1840-1912)' in David J. Jeremy (ed.), *Dictionary of Business Biography*, 5: S-Z, 1986, pp.776-9 (hereafter Brooker, *DBB*).
- 4 The best up-to-date survey of Liberalism in this period is G. R. Searle, *The Liberal Party: Triumph and Disintegration, 1886-1929*, 1992.
- 5 *The Times* 13 May 1912; see also 'Sir George White, MP, JP' in Ernest Gaskell, *Norfolk Leaders: Social and Political*, private publication, n.d. (c.1907), unpaginated; David Jones, 'Sir George White MP', *Ex Fonte: The Journal of the Plantation Garden Preservation Trust*, 7, 1986, pp.18-19.
- 6 J. H. Shakespeare, quoted in 'Mr George White, MP for North-West Norfolk' in W. T. Stead (ed.), *Coming Men on Coming Questions*, 1905, p.178.
- 7 *Eastern Daily Press* (hereafter *EDP*), 13 May 1912, p.7, quoting speech by White to his North-West Norfolk constituents.
- 8 *British Weekly* 16 May 1912, p.165; A. B. Cooper, 'Sir George White of Norwich', *The Sunday at Home*, May 1909, p.481.
- 9 Brooker, *DBB*, p.776; *EDP* 6 July 1910, p.7.
- 10 *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.7; *British Weekly* 16 May 1912, p.165.
- 11 *The Times* 13 May 1912.
- 12 Principal Gould at White's funeral, *EDP* 16 May 1912, p.4.
- 13 F. W. Wheldon, *A Norvic Century and the Men Who Made It, 1846-1946*, Norwich 1946, pp.93-103.
- 14 Revd J. Glynn Edwards, minister of St Mary's Baptist Church, at memorial service for White, *British Weekly* 23 May 1912, p.197.
- 15 This was a joint congregation with the paedobaptist Congregationalists, *British Weekly*, 16 May 1912, p.165.
- 16 *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.7; Cooper, *op.cit.*, p.483.
- 17 D. W. Bebbington, 'Baptist Members of Parliament in the Twentieth Century', *BQ* 31, 6, 1986, p.274.

- 18 Brooker, *DBB*, pp.778-9; *The Times* 13 May 1912.
- 19 J. H. Shakespeare, in Stead, *op.cit.*, p.178.
- 20 Cooper, *op.cit.*, p.482.
- 21 *Cox's County Who's Who: Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire*, 1912, p.255; Cooper, *op.cit.* p.487; *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.5, quoting speech from 1902.
- 22 George White, *History of the Norwich Young Men's Christian Association*, Norwich 1886, p.4.
- 23 *ibid.*, p.10.
- 24 Cooper, *op.cit.* p.485.
- 25 White, *History*, p.15.
- 26 Cooper, *op.cit.*, p.482.
- 27 Revd Tom Phillips, quoted in *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.7.
- 28 C. B. Jewson, *The Baptists in Norfolk*, 1957, p.107; Cooper, *op.cit.*, p.483.
- 29 *The Times* 13 May 1912.
- 30 *British Weekly* 16 May 1912, p.159. See below for details.
- 31 Jewson, *op.cit.*, p.135.
- 32 Cooper, *op.cit.*, p.482.
- 33 *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.7.
- 34 Cooper, *op.cit.*, p.485.
- 35 Brooker, *DBB*, p.778.
- 36 *British Weekly* 16 May 1912, p.159.
- 37 *Cox's County Who's Who*, 1912, p.255. He left £35,340 gross in his will. Brooker, *DBB* p.779.
- 38 Cooper, *op.cit.*, pp.484-6.
- 39 Brooker, *DBB* pp.776-7.
- 40 *ibid.*, p.777.
- 41 David Jones, 'Business, Tact and Thoroughness: A history of the Norvic Shoe Company Ltd', *Journal of the Norfolk Industrial Archaeology Society*, 4, 1, 1986, pp.20-1.
- 42 *ibid.*, pp.22-3.
- 43 Brooker, *DBB* p.777; *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.7.
- 44 Brooker, *DBB* p.777.
- 45 Wheldon, *op.cit.*, pp.38-9.
- 46 Cooper, *op.cit.*, p.485. For the general assault on St Monday see D. A. Reid, 'The decline of St Monday', *Past & Present*, 71, 1976, and for the imposition of time and work discipline, E. P. Thompson, 'Time, work discipline and industrial capitalism', *Past & Present*, 38, 1967, pp.56-97. To assist their efforts to impose good time-keeping, the partners paid the verger of the Anglican church of St George, Colegate, to keep the church clock wound up! Wheldon, *op.cit.*, p.39.
- 47 Cooper, *op.cit.* p.485; Wheldon, *op.cit.*, pp.86-9.
- 48 *ibid.*, pp.39-40; Jones, 'Business', p.23.
- 49 William Holmes, quoted in *ibid.*
- 50 *ibid.*
- 51 At the firm's diamond jubilee in 1906, no fewer than 350 employees had been with the firm for ten years or more, 70 of them for 25 years and one since the company started. *ibid.*
- 52 Jewson, *op.cit.*, p.124.
- 53 *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.7.
- 54 *ibid.*; Sir George White, 'How I became a politician', in unknown periodical, possibly *Sunday School Times*, 1909, pp.227-8.
- 55 *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.7; White, 'Politician'; Randolph Churchill, *Winston Spencer Churchill*, comp.vol.II, part 3, 1911-1914, pp.1429-30.
- 56 *EDP* 6 July 1910, p.7.
- 57 *EDP* 13 May 1912, pp.5,7.
- 58 Cooper, *op.cit.*, p.486; see also *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.5.
- 59 During the 1904 by-election he did hint that, had Louis Tillet not stood, he might have been persuaded to contest the seat. *Norfolk Evening Standard* 14 January 1904, p.5.
- 60 *The Times* 13 May 1912; *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.5. In the Liberal landslide of 1906, his majority was 2,800, falling back to around 1000 in the tougher elections of 1910. *British Weekly* 25 January 1906, p.466.
- 61 *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.5.
- 62 *The Times*, 13 May 1912; G. R. Searle, 'The Edwardian Liberal Party and Business', *English Historical Review*, XCVIII, 1983, p.37.
- 63 *Baptist Times & Freeman*, 1 February 1907, p.83. Originally the *British Weekly* supported McKenna, but later suggested that White should have been appointed: 21 January 1907, p.463, and 14 November 1907, p.139.
- 64 *Christian World*, 30 May 1907, p.3 and 20 February 1908, p.5.
- 65 *British Weekly*, 14 November 1907, p.138.
- 66 *EDP* 6 July 1910, p.7.
- 67 *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.7.
- 68 George White, *The Nonconformist Conscience in its Relation to our National Life*, Presidential address to the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, 27 April 1903.
- 69 *EDP* 11 January 1904, p.8.
- 70 *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.7 and p.5 quoting T. Phillips.
- 71 Searle, *The Liberal Party*, pp.64-8.
- 72 Even when strikes did occur, he could be remarkably magnanimous. There is an oft repeated story that in the midst of the 1897 strike in the Norwich footwear industry, the

- leader of the workers, fellow Liberal councillor, James Mason, was unable to provide the strike pay as expected and in desperation approached White, leader of the employers, who agreed to cover the missing funds, allowing the strike to continue. *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.5; Wheldon, *op.cit.*
- 73 White, *Nonconformist Conscience*, p.9.
- 74 *ibid.*, p.10.
- 75 *Glasgow Herald*, 7 October 1910, p.12.
- 76 Koss, *op.cit.*, p.118; *British Weekly*, 13 October 1910, supplement, p.61.
- 77 *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.5.
- 78 *EDP* 6 July 1910, p.7.
- 79 *British Weekly*, 3 April 1902, p.625, and 16 May 1912, p.189.
- 80 *The Times*, 13 May 1912; *British Weekly* 16 May 1912, p.165, referring to a speech in Croydon.
- 81 Jewson, *op.cit.*, p.133.
- 82 Noel J. Richards, 'The Education Bill of 1906 and the decline of political Nonconformity', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XXIII, 1972, pp.49-63; Bebbington, *Nonconformist Conscience*, pp.149-151.
- 83 Verbatim in *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.5.
- 84 *The Times* 13 May 1912; Cooper, *op.cit.*, p.487.
- 85 *British Weekly*, 18 January 1912, p.477 and 16 May 1912, p.165.
- 86 Cooper, *op.cit.* p.484.
- 87 Gaskell, *op.cit.*
- 88 *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.5.
- 89 Bebbington, *op.cit.* BQ, p.274; Cooper, *op.cit.* p.484; *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.5 and 16 May 1912, p.4.
- 90 *British Weekly* 25 April 1901, p.30; Cooper, *op.cit.* p.484.
- 91 *ibid.*; White, *Nonconformist Conscience*, p.14.
- 92 White, *The Drink Traffic and its relation to work and wages*, National Temperance League, 1894, p.7.
- 93 White, *Nonconformist Conscience*, p.14.
- 94 *EDP* 31 October 1901.
- 95 *British Weekly* 25 April 1901, p.30.
- 96 White, *Nonconformist Conscience*, p.15.
- 97 *EDP* 13 May 1912, p.5.
- 98 *Glasgow Herald* 5 October 1910, p.11.
- 99 *The Times*, 13 May 1912.
- 100 J. H. Shakespeare, quoting White in his funeral address, *EDP* 16 May 1912, p.4.
- 101 *EDP* 13 May p.5.
- 102 *British Weekly* 23 May 1912, p.197; *EDP* 16 May 1912, p.4.
- 103 *ibid.*
- 104 Doyle, *Business, Liberalism and Dissent* p.244.
- 105 *EDP* 16 May 1912, p.4.
- 106 The private cemetery at Rosary Road, Thorpe, Norwich, opened in the early nineteenth century by a group of wealthy nonconformists, and the main burial ground for the city's Free Church élite for the next one hundred years.
- 107 *EDP* 16 May 1912, p.4.

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Marilyn Lewis, *John Gibbs: A Newport Pagnell Puritan 1627-1699*, 1995, 171pp, £8-95 including p&p from author, The New Rectory, 51 High Street, Newport Pagnell, Bucks, MK16 8AB.

The author provides a clear account of John Gibbs. Well documented aspects of his life - Bunyan links, ejection and persecution as a Dissenter - are woven into a narrative of his times. Gibbs emerges as a strong-minded individual, not blinkered by party loyalty and as such Mrs Lewis sees him as a beacon for contemporary ecumenical reflection. He maintained good links with Baptists, indeed he was dubbed 'Anabaptist' (Catabaptist was more technically correct but equally abusive). In the 1690s, Gibbs found a fresh challenge to his greater catholicity in the aggressive Independency of Richard Davis of Rothwell. This A5 ring-bound book has an informative bibliography, but it unfortunately lacks footnotes and index.

STEPHEN COPSON