

Lord CLYDESMUIR (RONALD JOHN BILSLAND COLVILLE)
KT, CB, MBE, TD, BA(Cantab)

Ronald John Bilsland Colville, Baron Clydesmuir of Braidwood, former Governor of the Bank of Scotland and Lord-Lieutenant of Lanarkshire, died on 2 October 1996, aged 79. He was born in Glasgow on 21 May 1917.

The death in Edinburgh of Ronald Clydesmuir cost Scotland a most distinguished contributor to its public life and the Society lost one whose election in 1978 as an Honorary Fellow added lustre to the Fellowship. The sense of loss among those who knew him was as much for the private man as for the public servant. He was one of those happily constituted individuals who, wherever he found himself, spread good cheer and won lasting affection as well as earning admiration and respect. His underlying seriousness of purpose was conveyed with the lightest of touches and his achievements were camouflaged with an endearing modesty. His family background, education and upbringing, conventional in their day, always made it likely that he would be expected to shoulder responsibility but, as for so many of his and the previous generation, it was the turbulent events, national and international, political and economic, of the first half of this century that most profoundly shaped the man and influenced his subsequent career.

Clydesmuir, whose family name was Colville, was from a long-established Scottish family. He was a great-grandson of David Colville, founder of the huge iron and steel enterprise which, as Colvilles Limited, became a renowned and powerful force in the industrial development of the United Kingdom; and he was the only son of John Colville, a former Secretary of State for Scotland (1938-40), who became Governor of Bombay (1943-48) and was raised to the peerage in 1948 as the first Baron Clydesmuir. Ronald Colville was educated at Charterhouse, and at Trinity College, Cambridge. No sooner had he graduated from Cambridge in 1939 than he was drawn, at the age of 22, into the second great conflict with Germany to follow the one that had ended a mere twenty years before, and from which the country (and his father's generation) were still recovering. The tradition of service, already ingrained, left no room for hesitation and like so many thousands of his countrymen he joined a Scottish regiment, the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) in which his father had served in the war of 1914-18. He was in action with that regiment at Dunkirk, in Italy, and in the Normandy landings, was awarded the MBE and mentioned in despatches, serving throughout the 1939-45 war and for a short time thereafter. The Cameronians were famously recruited from Glasgow and the Lanarkshire area, the industrial heart of Scotland, and Clydesmuir always remained a West of Scotland man respecting and sharing the down-to-earth qualities of the men with whom he had fought. It was typical of him and of them that some of his merriest and most affectionate anecdotes, (and he was a master story-teller), had to do with the lighter off-duty events of these dangerous days and with the lifelong friends he made among his comrades in arms. More important was the influence that his military experiences brought to bear on his later life and after the war he continued his connections with the Army. Among his other appointments he became Chairman of Council of the Territorial, Auxiliary and Volunteer Associations (1969-73), and later President, (1974-81); commanded the 6/7th (Territorial) battalion of the Cameronians, and later became Honorary Colonel (1967-71); he was also Honorary Colonel of the 52nd Lowland Reserve Volunteers, TA&VR (1970-75). He never lost the upright and alert bearing, the directness of speech and method, and the disciplined self-control he had acquired in his army days. Nor did he forget the debts owed to the men who had served with him and, in many cases, suffered and died.

It was probably inevitable that Clydesmuir (he inherited the title on the death of his father in 1954) should join the family business on his return from the war and it was also in character that he should work his way up the hard way, successfully. He became a Director of Colvilles Limited in 1958. Meantime his lively personality, his abilities and his connections caused him to be in demand in many other spheres. One of these was the Scottish Council (Development & Industry), a body established in the thirties under the leadership of his uncle, Sir Steven (later Lord) Bilsland, to encourage the introduction of new, lighter industries to reduce the over-dependence of central Scotland on declining heavy industry, and to develop export markets. After the war the efforts to this effect continued with considerable success. Clydesmuir joined the Executive Committee in 1954, became its Chairman in 1966 and President of the Council in 1972, an appointment he held until 1986. In these entirely voluntary roles he worked tirelessly in productive association with successive chief executives, not least the redoubtable Dr Willie Robertson, and he led pioneering and successful trade missions to the Soviet Union and China.

Among the many other honorary and voluntary activities which benefited from his interest and support were his chairmanship of the Scottish Council of Physical Recreation, of the Scottish branch of the National Playing Fields Association and of the Scottish Outward Bound Association.

However, though he remained exceptionally generous with the time he gave to such causes, he became increasingly preoccupied with business interests particularly in the field of banking and finance and from an early stage in the developing Scottish oil and gas industry. Since his appearance on the scene after the war he had been in demand as a non-executive director and among his early appointments was as a director of the British Linen Bank, then a wholly-owned subsidiary of Barclays Bank. He was appointed Governor of that bank in 1966 and on its merger with the Bank of Scotland in 1971 he became Deputy Governor of the merged bank. In 1972, on the resignation of Lord Polwarth to take

up a political appointment, he was elected Governor of the Bank of Scotland, an office he held with distinction until his retirement in 1981. His period as Governor of the Bank saw many changes and his leadership showed itself first in the successful and productive completion of the integration of the two banks and thereafter in the imaginative use of new technology and in the profitable expansion of the Bank's business, domestically within Scotland, in England and internationally. From an era when high business office is often associated in the public mind with self-seeking it is salutary to look back on his career which was one of impeccably unselfish dedication to the organisation he led, and served.

The distinctions and honours bestowed upon Ronald Clydesmuir are indicative of the high regard in which he was held. In addition to his war-time awards he was appointed CB in 1965 and became a Knight of the Thistle in 1972. He was Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly, Church of Scotland, in 1971 and 1972. He held office as Lord-Lieutenant of Lanarkshire from 1963 to 1992, having been Deputy-Lieutenant (1955-59) and Vice Lieutenant (1959-63). He was a long-serving member of the Royal Company of Archers, Queen's Body Guard for Scotland, and from 1986 until shortly before his death he held the office of Captain General. He also held honorary degrees awarded by Strathclyde and Heriot-Watt Universities.

Most of these facts are a matter of record and are recounted in the obituary notices published at the time of Ronald Clydesmuir's death. They speak for themselves. The character and personality of the man remain foremost in the memory of one who had the good fortune to have known and worked with him in varied settings for over thirty years. Invariably courteous and kind-hearted, correct but wholly without pomposity, mild-mannered but with the inherited steel below, unflappable under pressure, shrewd and wise to a degree that his self-deprecatory ways disguised, a loyal and supportive colleague, possessing a marvellous sense of humour and also when appropriate, which was quite often, an irresistible Wodehousian sense of fun. The punch lines of his most amusing anecdotes were accompanied and often even anticipated by his delightful and most infectious chuckle. To say he had an easy charm hazards a wrong impression. He did, but it was of a kind that came so naturally, so devoid of guile, that one soon learned it did not hide but reflected the true man. It is no exaggeration to say that I have never met anyone who knew him who did not like and admire Ronald Clydesmuir.

Ronald Clydesmuir enjoyed the open air and made time for outdoor leisure pursuits such as shooting and fishing where his cheerfulness and expertise made him a welcome companion, but nowhere was he happier than with his family. His wife, Joan, whose own life has always been brim full of activities, gave him the kind of support all men in such a position must wish for, as well as creating a delightful home to which their four children and the grandchildren seemed often, and most happily, to make their way. In the year before his death he had been troubled by ill-health but he met this adversity with the same cheerful sang-froid and courage which he had shown throughout his life. He was a man of his time, born with outstanding gifts which he used unselfishly to the full.

THOMAS RISK