



ABRAHAM LEVINE

MEMOIRS

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WITH deep regret we have to record the death on 12 February 1949 of Abraham Levine, M.A., F.I.A., F.C.I.I., a past President of the Institute of Actuaries and of the Chartered Insurance Institute. In him the Institute has lost one of its most distinguished members, a man noted for his scholarship, his great administrative powers, his wide culture, his interest in all good causes, his generosity and kindness, and consequently for the affection in which he was held by all his many friends.

Abraham Levine, the name by which he was always known to the Institute and to the insurance world, but Arthur Levine in his family circle, was born in 1870. He was the second son of a large family and means were sadly straitened. His education began at a local Glasgow school where he soon made his mark, for at the early age of 15 he won a bursary which secured his entry to Glasgow University. Here he studied mathematics, Greek, Latin, philosophy and logic and it was not until a later stage that he specialized in mathematics, and gained both a Gold Medal and a Scholarship competed for by students from all the Scottish Universities. He was also elected as popular representative of the students on the University Council. But from the very outset and as a lad of 13 he had to meet the payments needed for his own educational advancement by coaching pupils and in addition he managed to earn enough to help in supporting his younger brothers. From Glasgow he gained a scholarship that enabled him to proceed to Cambridge. At Jesus College he gained further scholarships and eventually graduated in the Mathematical Tripos as twelfth wrangler and was elected to a Fellowship of his College. But throughout his Cambridge career successes were handicapped by inadequate means. He has recorded that, though he joined the Debating Society of his own College, he could not afford to join the Union. And he was still compelled to continue to earn money by coaching and to contribute towards family support. He took, however, as full a part as he could in all University activities that did not involve the outlay of money. It has been well said that 'hard conditions are favourable conditions' and this truism can hardly ever have been better exemplified than in Levine's own case. For such conditions did not harden him. On the contrary, they broadened his sympathies and throughout his long life his generosity to those in difficulty or trouble knew no bounds. An old friend writes of him 'his benefactions, I believe, were often known only to the recipient and to himself'. They were not only widespread but judicious, as one would expect from one of his knowledge and judgment.

Soon after leaving Cambridge in 1893 he decided to become an actuary and so came his introduction to the insurance world. In 1894, at the age of 24, he joined the National Mutual Life Assurance Society as a junior clerk, and supplemented the meagre salary paid to juniors in those days by coaching at a school, this enabling him to continue to remit money to his family at home. He lived himself in the most austere and frugal manner. All this time he was studying for his actuarial examinations. He became an Associate of the Institute in 1894 and a Fellow two years later. In 1900 he was appointed Assistant Actuary of the National Mutual and five years later joined the Alliance Assurance Company Ltd.,

the Company with which he was to be so happily and successfully associated for over thirty years. Starting as Assistant Actuary, his title was soon changed to that of Actuary, then enlarged to Actuary and Life Manager, and finally, in 1929, to General Manager, a rare distinction for an actuary in the case of a great composite office and one of which he was legitimately proud. This position he held for ten years, his retirement taking place in 1939 when he was nearly seventy years of age.

At the Institute of Actuaries his success was equally outstanding. He became a Member of the Council in 1906 and served upon it for 27 years, occupying in turn nearly every post open to him, being successively Secretary, Vice-President, Treasurer and, in 1928–30, President. He was an examiner on many occasions and a tutor for six years.

Apart from the Institute, his insurance activities covered a wide field. He became President of the Chartered Institute in 1936 and though in his address he referred modestly to his term of office as 'a period of quiet progress, with no outstanding feature to report' it was marked by revision of the governing constitution and by modifications of the examination syllabus. And it is told of him that, though little known to the provincial bodies at the time of his election to the Chair, he had such a complete grasp of all aspects of insurance business that he had become, by the time his term of office expired, one of the most popular of presidents. He was Chairman of the Life Offices' Association in 1921–22, a foundation member of the London Insurance Institute, active in starting the Insurance Officials' Society, a Trustee of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway Annuities—a post which he retained until his death—and Chairman of the Investment Protection Committee of the British Insurance Association, to name only a few out of the many insurance interests in which he took a leading part. At the time of the controversies aroused by the introduction of the first National Health Insurance Act he was called in as adviser by the Trade Unions and Mr Lloyd George (as he then was) publicly referred to Levine by name as having given the advice that secured their support to the measure. His interests in charitable institutions were widespread, and included more particularly the Royal United Kingdom Benevolent Association of which he was the Consulting Actuary for many years.

Levine held strong views as to what education should cover. These found full expression in his Presidential addresses. Education to him meant much more than mere vocational training. It must be much more broadly based and he held that the best practical man was one who had also a thorough grasp of the theory of his subject. How fully this view of training was borne out by his own life! To quote his own words: 'Education is not knowledge, still less is it vocational training; rather it is the preparation of the mind, the making of the mind into as perfect an instrument as possible for dealing with the whole of life... The educated man must possess the critical faculty and the power of reasoning... Education should lead to a broadening of one's outlook and should stimulate individuality... You need a critical mind if you are to see both sides of a question... Intellectual progress is only possible where these qualities of criticism and tolerance are freely permitted.' He continuously urged the importance of a readier acceptance of new ideas, coupled always with the reservation that such ideas should not be accepted without proper study and investigation. The actuary, he insisted, must satisfy himself that his work rested on a solid foundation of science and theory. And over and over again he emphasized the importance of thoroughness in the training and work of the actuary. 'Train your brain power', he urged, 'and however dull your work may appear, give the

best of your mind to it.' He closed his memorable Presidential Address to the Institute with the words of the injunction laid upon us of old: 'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.'

But it must not be thought that his strenuous life was limited entirely to work. In his earlier years he was a great walker and he and Todhunter had many mountain tramps together. Despite his defective eyesight—reference to which will be made later—he was for more than thirty years a keen golfer. He used humorously to say that he could never follow the flight of the ball and had to trust entirely to his caddie to find it. But he reached a fair average handicap and thoroughly enjoyed the game.

In 1898 G. F. Hardy and his wife invited many of his old pupils and other friends, including Levine, to join them at Tell's Platte, on the Lake of Lucerne. The Hardy's had taken a Chalet attached to the hotel, with the lake lying 400 feet below and the Uri-Rotstoch towering beyond. Across the Axen-Strasse was a wood leading by a stiff ascent to the higher Alps beyond. It was a most enjoyable holiday, thanks to our perfect hosts, and it resulted in many life-long friendships.

Music was perhaps Levine's main interest in later years and of this, on its classical side, he had deep knowledge. Beethoven was his favourite composer, with all the other classical held in close fellowship. Jazz made no appeal to him. In his later years the wireless became a source of deep interest to him, and increasingly so as his eyesight failed. On his retirement from the Alliance he was presented with a most up-to-date set which enabled him to receive broadcasts from all parts of the world. I need hardly add that his reading was extensive and many sided. All his life he read and studied books, concentrating perhaps in later years mainly on history and biography, but ever seeking the human aspect in his reading. Year after year he read everything in the way of solid literature that could conduce to his general knowledge, and his remarkably retentive memory—of which many records have come down to us—enabled him to retain, to a far greater extent than most of us can ever hope to do, the most vivid recollections of anything that he had read or heard of in the past, coupled with an instantaneous power of applying such remembrances to current problems. An instance of this may be quoted from his early days at the National Mutual. He would habitually examine Foster and Cranfield's catalogues of policies for sale, and would, after a few minutes' study, without consulting any books of reference, write on the particulars 'Offer £...'. When the exact figures were afterwards worked out for him his mental answer always proved to be a close approximation to the computed figure. As an Institute tutor his assumption of the rapid interpretation by his pupils of what he had swiftly chalked out on the black-board was much like that recorded of G. F. Hardy. After filling the black-board—much obscured in those days by the voluminous frock coat of the tutor—he proceeded at once to rub out the upper part, or, even worse, to jump a few intermediate steps, after which he would add 'from which you will easily deduce...' and then write down the ultimate results. But old pupils are unanimous as to his excellence as a tutor and to his more than sympathetic attitude to his students' troubles.

In politics, though he took little or no active side as regards party, he was consistently a left-wing Liberal, with a life-long sympathy for the under-dog. His own early struggles doubtless brought about this mental attitude and its practical outcome was shown by his consistent support of many good causes.

Levine became an early member of the Gallio Club after its foundation in 1903 and for many years he was a regular attendant at its dinners. In 1909 he

was elected to the Actuaries' Club, of which he became Chairman, 1925-27. After the destruction of Staple Inn Hall in 1944 he presented to the Institute a handsome oak Lectern, designed and carved in harmony with the old furniture of the Hall. This was accepted by the then President, Mr R. C. Simmonds, who in the course of a charming speech said: 'This Lectern is a gift to the Institute from Mr Levine, whose work for, and interest in, the welfare of the Institute are known to so many and are on record for us all.'

If these notes afford any just estimate of the man it will be seen that his career, which started and long continued under such adverse conditions, was crowned by success in every field. He overcame not only his early financial difficulties but his life-long defective sight. Even in early manhood he wore the strongest of glasses and by the time he was fifty serious deterioration had begun to set in. But he did not allow this to hinder his professional career, great as the handicap must continuously have been. Those who turn up his Presidential address in Volume LX of the *Journal*, will see that it was printed in large type so as to enable him to read it. Many years later came an operation for cataract, followed by equally unsuccessful treatment under a Swiss oculist of world-wide reputation and, eventually, by complete blindness. This, as would be expected, he faced with characteristic courage, an instance of which deserves record. Only a few weeks before his unexpected death he attended a dinner of the Actuaries' Club; he looked radiantly well and received the warmest of welcomes from all his old friends.

Looking back, it is difficult to sum up in a few words the main factors which governed him throughout life. Leaving out of account his scholarship, his industry and his thoroughness we may, however, rightly refer to his unswerving integrity, his natural simplicity and modesty, his ever ready sympathy and generosity and above all his personal charm. Indeed, for those who knew him best, it was his character rather than his achievements that will live in memory.

This memoir cannot be complete without a word of reference to his happy domestic life. He married in 1899, so that at the close of the most perfect of unions he and his wife just failed to reach their Golden Jubilee. In those closing years of blindness, his wife helped him throughout as no one else could have done and he, on his side, reciprocated to the full the loving devotion she gave him so unstintingly. Happily he was spared a long illness. Ten days before his death he had a seizure and, though he seemed to be recovering, a relapse set in and he passed away a few hours later. The cremation at Golders Green was attended by many old friends and by representatives of the various interests to which his life's work had been so strenuously devoted. To his wife and son the sympathy of all our members will be whole-heartedly extended.

A. D. B.