

*Rev. Dr Russell's Tribute at Funeral Service, Ballywalter Presbyterian Church  
on Sat. Oct. 18<sup>th</sup>, 1997.*

## **George Little - 1927-1997**

We'll all have our own enduring pictures of George - passing through the village on the tractor, at the desk among his beloved plans and calculations, sitting with a beaming smile in an armchair with a grandchild on his knee, standing in the church vestibule welcoming the people to worship - I'm sure most of us will have that personal mental snapshot that best sums up all that we appreciated most about George and the empty places in our lives that his passing has left. Many of us could write at least a small book about him but this is not the place, even if we had the time, to read you mine. Instead I'm going to suggest some words that sum up much of what he was and what we will miss about him: Figures, Finance, Farming, Friends and Family.

George was famous, sometimes notorious, for his love of order. Calculations, plans and tables determined so much of the pattern of his life. He knew exactly what he was hoping to do on the same day next week. He had a passion for order, and I remember him telling me how much he enjoyed clearing things away and tidying up. Given the chance he would have loved to study accountancy, but he brought his very natural skills to bear on all aspects of his life and often very generously and helpfully to other people as well. The professional financiers who knew him respected not just his accuracy with figures but the exactness of his integrity as well.

Many in our community will remember George best as a farmer. He certainly fitted the image as a robust, strong man and it almost came as a shock when he decided to retire after over 50 years on the land. Potatoes, barley, wheat, cattle, pigs were all cultivated and cared for in the same meticulous way that George did everything else. Even the machinery was well maintained and made to last - not for George the latest shiny model, when the old one would do the job just as well! I remember the time he fitted a new device to his old combine which told him exactly the yield he was getting from his grain so that the calculations could be worked out to the last figure. He was always happy to share his insights and skills with his neighbours and the wider farming community and many a former young farmer must be grateful for what George was able to teach. Efficient as he was many of us know that George was also generous with his potatoes as well as in many other ways.

He may have been devoted to figures and agriculture but George was equally interested in people and friendship was at the heart of his life. His friendship was always generous and helpful and his passion for seeing things done well often involved the gift of much of his time in advice and organisation of the financial affairs of so many who appreciated help for which he would take no reward. He had few inhibitions about getting to know people. I remember once asking how he had come by some bit of information or other and his reply was: 'Ask and it will be given unto you.' His years of impaired hearing meant that George didn't always catch the drift of the conversation but when he did his replies and comments often revealed a disarming sense of humour which went to the very heart of the discussion. He liked his own

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way, and we didn't always agree with him, but his was a friendship that could survive differences, arguments and even occasional defeat without grievence.

But closest of all to George's heart was the family and the 40 years he shared with Rosemary at Killyvolgan. And that was more than just Rosemary with Brian, Peter and Alan. There was the welcoming inclusiveness that gave a loving place to Rosemary's parents and aunt Evelyn before it was necessary for them to have the care of Movilla House. Even then, Movilla House itself became another focus of George's interest as he befriended residents and staff alike and showed his interest in so many typically practical ways. Similarly it seemed the most natural thing in the world for Jackie, Jill and Barbara to be included in the family circle as they became daughters in law and then mothers of the grandchildren George doted on so much. Perhaps the description of himself he valued most was 'grandpaman'.

Figures, finance, farming, friends and family - Anyone who knew George must have realised that they only had their real meaning within the wider context of the faith he represented and the church he belonged to all his life and which he served for so many years. As in other walks of life he brought his skill with figures and finance, his meticulous attention to detail, his practical gifts and, above all, his interest in people to our Presbyterian community. After some years on the congregational committee the congregation chose him as an elder in 1969 so that he served on the session for almost three decades of development and change in the life of the church. George's involvement in the church was never narrow or parochial. He enjoyed being part of the Ards Presbytery and served on the architectural committee and relished his turn to be representative elder at the Assembly. Typically he found out who people were and made friends. But perhaps we will remember him most as congregational treasurer, a post which he handed on to Isobel but from which he never really retired as he continued on the finance committee and as a ready source of advice. As a Kirk Session, Committee and congregation we will miss him terribly as an elder who had the interests of our church very close to his heart and for the smaller things - down to the Christmas trees that we can take for granted he would provide each year. It was just like George to make sure that his district visits had been done before he went into hospital.

In the end, George enjoyed his retirement. There was more time for family and friends and for all those unrecorded and sometimes unnoticed practical things he did for other people and around the property of our church. We were glad to see him and Rosemary disappear for cruises and holidays. Yet the old habits of calculation and order still led him to make detailed plans and arrangements, even for the events of today. Perhaps, as he enjoyed that last holiday in Scarborough and, typically, befriended another couple and then gave so much help when the lady injured her ankle, he had his own thoughts about the operation that awaited when he came home. When he spoke to me, he contemplated the possibilities with peace. His death, after such a promising recovery can only reinforce our outrage at the unfairness of our chaotic, fallen and sinful world but I know that Rosemary and the family wish to express their appreciation to the staff at the Ards and the Ulster Hospitals and especially to Mr. Calvert the

surgeon for doing their best and more than their duty.

Our service this morning isn't just an opportunity to appreciate George Little and grieve at his passing. It's also the time to proclaim the hope that we have in Jesus Christ, even in the face of the absurdity and indignity of death. But what is that hope? When we commend a person for the life they have lived it might seem natural somehow to present that commendation to God, as if that person had a right to eternal life as a reward for what they have done and what they have been. George, of all people, must have known how wrong this would be as a denial of all that he had learned and stood for within the Church of Jesus Christ. When we stand before God 'all our righteous acts are like filthy rags' (Is. 64:6) and we are confronted by his presence exposed and condemned. However much we thought of him, George was a human being like the rest of us with the defects of thought and motive which destroy our fellowship with God so that even our best actions leave us morally bankrupt. We leave George in God's hands today, not because of what George has done for others or even for the church, but because of what God has done for George. 'You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' (Rom. 5:7,8). I'm sure that's why George chose our next hymn for this service, 'The Old Rugged Cross', for our only hope for eternity is in the empty cross of our crucified and risen saviour who died that 'whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.' The Christian hope lies in clinging to that old rugged cross. It is my hope and prayer that each of us, faced once again by the reality of death and judgement will cling to it for ourselves and face our own mortality in the forgiveness and peace that comes only when we commit our lives to the saviour who loved us and gave himself for us.