

The Hon. George Fowlds, C.B.E.

HONOUR to whom honour is due. This month "The New Zealand Draper and Clothier" has the pleasure of publishing an interview with a member of the trade who is a "Leader" in more senses than one. And, moreover, one to whom the sobriquet—honourable—is honourably given by a young country quick to recognise sterling worth. "A man's a man, for a' that" wrote Scotland's bard, and Scottish ancestry, heredity, and training had already made of George Fowlds, one of Ayrshire's sons, "a man, for a' that" in what was to happen to him once his foot had left his native heath.

Altruism is the keynote of Mr. Fowlds' character. It is reflected in his record, as a man, as an employer, as a legislator, as a statesman.

He is the son of a centenarian, who, in his 101st year, presented each of Mr. Fowlds' six children with a pair of blankets woven by his own hands on his own loom, at Grey-stone Knowe, in the parish of Fenwick, Ayrshire, Scotland.

Mr. George Fowlds to-day owns and cherishes this Scottish home built by the grandfather of Matthew Fowlds, the centenarian, and the proud birthplace of each successive generation.

It was on the 15th of September, 1860, that the future New Zealand Clothier, Mercer, Minister of Educa-

tion, and man of affairs, first saw the light. He was one of a family of five boys and one girl, all of whom lived to celebrate their father's hundredth birthday in 1906. The father was a handloom weaver; a task calling for great strength, endurance and some skill.

In the summer-time, the youthful George worked on the farm, in the winter he worked on the loom.

"Being a strong, healthy boy, I soon learned to get into the clink of it, and I remember working well into the night to help finish an order for marriage blankets."

Matthew Fowlds was an active man in public affairs, and a keen politician, and there was no abatement of his mental powers when he died in his 101st year as the result of a fractured thigh caused by an accident.

The subject of our interview went to Hairshaw School in Waterside Village. The old schoolmaster had knee trouble, and for 30 years of his life hadn't a leg to stand on, so he had a hole cut in the ceiling over the schoolroom, and hauled himself in his wheel chair up out of sight with a pulley. A. W. Meiklejohn was his name, and when his thirty-three scholars were assembled he would descend upon them by the same old method, to call the roll. Although not a trained teacher, quite a number of his boys gained eminence, such as the Rev. James

Leaders of the Trade

Barr, a leading light of the United Free Church of Scotland, and Professor Calderwood, the occupant of the chair of Physiology at Glasgow University. An unforgettable sorrow of those youthful days was being compelled to go to school in a kilt. Schooling ceased at the age of twelve, but was resumed again later at evening classes at the Andersonian College, Glasgow.

The loom already mentioned was also used to make linen for sheets. The "lint" was grown on the farm, and was spun into thread by the womenfolk. A piece of linen woven by Matthew Fowlds sixty years before was recently found in the possession of a lady in Galston Parish. Mr. Fowlds has not yet forgotten the wearisome task of handing the threads through the "heddles" while the heavy beam is suspended overhead. Sometimes, maybe, he wished he "never had gin'd it." His first business experience as a boy was in the clothing trade with the old-established firm of Stewart Bros., of Kilmarnock, in 1874. Conditions prevailing then are a striking commentary on the comparative luxury of the wage-earner to-day, in New Zealand at all events. Each morning he rose at 5 a.m., walked 4 miles to the town, and another mile to get the keys, and opened the shop at 7 a.m. The tailors began work at 6 a.m. and worked till 6 p.m. The message boy received 4/- a week for his first year, 5/- for the second, 6/- for the third, and 7/- a week for the fourth year of service. After he had finished delivering parcels, he walked 4 miles home again. Kilmarnock had a population of 24,000. In 1878 he

transferred his services to Wm. McLaren, Sons & Co., Ltd., General Soft Goods Merchants, St. George's Square, Glasgow.

Mr. Fowlds avers that "Glasgow has led the world in municipal enterprise, in baths, gas, water, trams, electric light. There is something about the atmosphere that produced a vigorous type of men. Ships took them to see the big world outside and they came back with big ideas."

Like Greenock, of which an inhabitant once remarked to a complaining visitor, "It doesna' always rain in Greenock — it sometimes snaws." Glasgow "enjoys" a heavy, solid rainfall that disgusted the man o' Ayr, and a sudden inspiration prompted him to go to South Africa, where he had heard the sun really shone sometimes two days running.

In 1882 he landed in Cape Town with 3/6 in his pocket. (N.B.—The 3/6 was borrowed.) There was an old Dutch foreign look about Cape Town forty years ago. There was also a smallpox epidemic. The Dutch farmers avoided Cape Town, and there was no business doing. The authorities were careless about sanitation and quarantine regulations.

"I spent a fortnight walking the streets, looking for work, and watching the disappearance of my 3/6. I learned the full meaning of 'financial stringency.'" Things had become desperate when I found a stonemason friend laying curbstones. He got me a job at less than 2/- a day in a quarry where the convicts were working stone for the breakwater. The contractor contracted smallpox and

The Hon. George Fowlds, C.B.E.

died. I was again out of a job. Then I came across a steerage passenger, who helped me to a job in the railway workshops, where I cleaned and painted passenger coaches until I got into trouble with the Dutch boss for working too fast, and refusing to 'stand in' with the rest on overtime payments."

Place was sacrificed to principle, and a railway journey to Beaufort West, and 400 miles in a Cape cart to Kimberley, taken. Another fortnight wandering about the diamond fields looking for work, and picking up odd jobs. Darker and darker loomed the prospect, culminating finally in "the Black Christmas Day of 1882 in Kimberley."

"My only pal was in hospital. I had no money. No friends." Mr. Fowlds still smiles at the memories of those early hardships. When things get to the worst, they must mend.

"A flag used to be run up at the post office when the fortnightly mail came in. It reminded me of a letter from a Mr. Parker, of Glasgow, that I had not made use of."

"On 'New Year's Day' my luck changed. I got a position as book-keeper in Bullfontein, from a Mr. Rogers, of Wood & Parker, general merchants. This Mr. Rogers years after got into gaol as a member of the Jamieson Raid Committee in Johannesburg. It was here I found I could do something better than the other fellow. The only prize I ever won at school was for arithmetic. It was here that it stood me in good stead. In my own time I also worked for a second firm. It was strenuous, but I was young." During these

hard-bitten years on the Diamond Fields, Mr. Fowlds met Dr. Jamieson, Cecil Rhodes, Rudd, and knew the famous Barney Barnato when he was very hard up. The mine-owners and the skilled workers in the diamond mines were mainly all British.

Having gained some reputation on "the fields" — amassed what must have looked like the wealth of Croesus — he was drawing £30 a month each from the firms he was working for—Mr. Fowlds had it in mind to start as an accountant.

But "the best laid plans o' mice and men gang aft agley." Dame Fortune had another future for George Fowlds to follow. In September, 1884, he had married Miss Fulton, who had come out from his native parish to link her fate with his. The South African climate proved unsuitable. Having cousins in New Zealand his thoughts off turned towards Maoriland. With prosperity, self-assurance and confidence had returned. House and furniture were sold. Six weeks spent waiting to get a berth on one of the emigrant-crowded steamers. In December, 1885, the ship they were on, lay off the wharf at Auckland. Again Fortune frowned. Things were very bad in the Queen City. The prospect was not alluring. The first reception was a meeting of the unemployed on the wharf under "old Garrard." (He was afterwards put in as dog-catcher.) This was intended to frighten the passengers away from landing in Auckland.

"I had made up my mind to go to Auckland and to stay there. I had some capital, but as I could get no other kind of work I did pick and

Leaders of the Trade

shovel work, painting, carpentering, anything, at 7/- a day. Cutting down a bank in front of a house still standing in Napier Street; digging and delving here and there, I may claim to have helped to lay the foundations of Auckland. At last I became a salesman in a hat and mercery shop at 30/- a week. Six months later, in 1886, I bought out a small clothing and mercery business in Victoria Street and carried it on for two years."

Then Mr. Fowlds became a champion of lost causes, and through the Official Assignee in Bankruptcy, he bought the stock and fixtures of W. G. Allen, a clothier and mercer in the Victoria Arcade.

Here was laid the foundation-stone of the present large business of George Fowlds Ltd.

In 1905, Mr. G. M. Fowlds, then 19 years old, joined his father, and took over the principal care of the business. At this time Mr. Geo. Fowlds was taking an active part in public life. In November, 1910, a branch was opened in Manners Street, Wellington, under Mr. Harold Miller. This also has been very successful. Mr. Fowlds believes in putting responsibility on young men's shoulders, and Mr. Miller was only 24 years of age when he was entrusted with management.

Of Mr. Fowlds' many sided public activities the name is legion. He had been at hand-grips with life's stark realities. He was a man of strong convictions, without variability or turning. He had taken hostages to fortune, and could see it at its lowest ebb, or in full tide, with the same calm imperturbability, with native

clearness of vision, and that saving grace of humour that finds ever the silver lining behind the darkest cloud.

His character was formed in the crucible of experience.

He became a member and was for many years vice-president of the Auckland Burns Club. He promoted literary and debating societies and a Parliamentary Union of them all; he was Chairman of the School Committee of his district; member of the Mt. Albert Road Board; a Freemason active in the formation of the Grand Lodge of N.Z. in 1890; Deputy-Grand Master in 1894; senior deacon of Beresford Church; chairman of the Congregational Union of New Zealand in 1899, and in 1914; member of Parliament for Auckland City, 1899; member for Grey Lynn 1902, 1905, and 1908; in 1911 he was defeated by only 30 votes in a poll of 7,000; in 1914 and 1919 he was again defeated by small majorities in three-cornered contests; in August, 1906, he joined the Ward Ministry as Minister of Education and Public Health. During the ensuing five years he also administered for varying terms the Customs, Defence, Justice, Mental Hospitals, Hospital and Charitable Aid, and the State Fire Insurance Departments.

In 1910 he was chosen by the Government to represent the Dominion at the opening of the Union Parliament in South Africa, where he was cordially welcomed as an old South African by both the Dutch and English leaders of that country.

Quite unexpectedly, Mr. Fowlds resigned his position in the Govern-

The Hon. George Fowlds, C.B.E.

ment in September, 1911, "because he felt that he could do better service for his country out of office than he could do in office." All sections of the press expressed appreciation of the fine work he had done at the Education Department.

For his patriotic services rendered during the War period he was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire.

He has been deputy-Chairman of the Joint Committee of the Red Cross and the Order of St. John since its inception; deputy-Chairman of St. John Ambulance Association and of the Blind Institute; president and treasurer of the Society for the Protection of Women and Children and the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; he is chairman of the Auckland University College Council; member of the Senate of the University of New Zealand; chairman of the Lectures Committee and Lecturer on Chairmanship for the Workers' Educational Association; first President of the Auckland Rotary Club; Vice-President of the Orphans' Club. In addition to this, Mr. Fowlds is President or Vice-President of many football, cricket, tennis, hockey, boating and bowling clubs, and quite recently he has taken up the ancient Scottish game of golf.

If "it takes nine tailors to make a man," how many tailors would it take to make a clothier and mercer whose mind and inclination and energy had the diamond-like quality of presenting a facet to reflect the light from every point of the compass. And since 1893 Mr. Fowlds has been round the world four times.

It will be gathered from what has

been written that the motto of such a career and such a character has been "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might," whether it be errand boy, warehouseman, traveller, accountant, roadmender, barrowman, labourer, clothier, mercer, legislator, or statesman.

A large canvas would be required to portray adequately the lineaments of such a many-sided character, and many pages to tell the story "From a Scotch village to New Zealand's Legislative Assembly."

To some men is given, as the result of arduous achievement, a wisdom, an assurance, a self-possession, a calm outlook on life, an evenness of temperament, a preparedness for life's emergencies, and a strengthening of the moral fibre, that can only come in the stern school of experience.

The story that the Hon. George Fowlds has to tell needs no embroidery from the "interviewer" of the "New Zealand Draper."

Behind the simple relation of the facts of a career more than usually full of unwonted incident, the discerning reader will see for himself or herself, the spirit of a simple, unwavering uprightness—principle—steadfastness—love of truth, call it what you will—but back of it all is that unwavering polarity of the magnetic North to which the compass needle ever turns, and must ever obey—moral rectitude. Enough has been said to show that here is yet another of Scotia's sons, without whom New Zealand would have been the poorer.

H. R.
