

21. The 1930s - End of an Era

Note:

1. THIS IS NOT WHERE THIS CHAPTER STARTS!
2. **This only covers so far Charlie, Frank, Vic, and James's deaths.**
3. **Still to write: Betty in 1927; Wallace in 1931, Bessie Molteno in 1933, and Percy and Caroline in 1937.**
4. **Summing up of James (p. 11): Make sure these points not already made earlier in the book.**
5. **Decide where *A Personal Note* at the end is best placed in the book.**

Charlie Molteno, 1924 – the last patriarch

Although Maria Anderson had been the first of Sir John Molteno's children to die (back in 1903), it was only in the mid 1920s that a succession of deaths heralded the beginning of the end of the huge, tightly knit Molteno/Murray clan. It was a Saturday, 5 January 1924, when Charlie went into Tamboerskloof Nursing Home, overlooking the Cape Town city centre, for what should have been a routine operation on his prostate. The operation went well, but ten days later he caught pneumonia and, to make matters worse, the city was experiencing a terrible heat wave.¹ Instead of recovering as Lucy and the whole family had expected, Charlie died on 23 January.

A lifelong friend of the family, Anna Purcell, wrote a moving tribute to him. She described how his friends admired 'his tall fine figure and dignified bearing – [and] the courtly grace with which he bared his head in greeting them as they met'. She was struck by what she was certain was an echo of his original ancestry – 'the beauty of those typical Italian eyes with their sweeping dark lashes'. Among his friends, he was widely known as 'the Beaufort Boer'— an acknowledgement of the many years he had spent farming on the Karoo and the fact, perhaps, that his mother had been half-Dutch. Anna Purcell acknowledged that his reserve had prevented even most of his friends from seeing his 'tender heart, full of sympathy and kindness' or were properly aware of his 'unselfishness of spirit'.² And this was confirmed by his brother, Victor, who told his wife, Mildred, after his death: 'Charlie always appears not to feel things much, but it is but his manner, and he is really very sensitive.'³

¹ *Cape Times*, 24 Jan. 1924.

² Anna Purcell, 'John Charles Molteno', 23 Jan. 1924, TS, unpublished.

³ Mildred Molteno (nee Jones) to Betty Molteno, 15 Feb. 1924.

Wallace and all the other brothers and sisters, including Ted Molteno, were very upset at his premature passing. Wallace had always regarded Charlie as the mainstay of the whole family⁴ and Betty agreed: 'He took the place of his Father to the women and the minors of the family. And he has won the admiration, respect and deep love of Lady Molteno [Minnie] and the children of the second family.' Writing frankly, as had become usual with her in old age, Betty went on: 'I had my difficulties in getting very close to him' for he was a 'sensitive and reserved soul', 'but as regards his public and his business life, he always had my deep respect and admiration. And in later life, the difficulty of manner was fully overcome in my case. [And] I am deeply in his debt for the way in which he took money difficulties off my mind.'⁵ And writing to Caroline, she looked back to her time when she had been headmistress of her school before the Boer War. 'No one else has given me quite the same sympathetic understanding and appreciation of the work I tried to do at Port Elizabeth. He aided me again and again with sympathy and practical help.'⁶

Mildred summed up Charlie's significance for the whole family particularly well: 'His passing will leave a great blank in the family. Ted and all the brothers at Glen Elgin were specially fond of him. In spite of a difficult and reserved manner, we all knew him to be a man of high principle and with a kind heart.'⁷

Percy felt his brother's unexpected death particularly acutely. Betty wrote to Lucy from London to say how it 'has touched on strings in Percy that have been jarred and worn almost to breaking point, and the suffering to him reacts on Bessie – and you know what sensitive nerves hers are also.'⁸ The news had reached him by cable on the very day of Charlie's death. He shared his feelings immediately with Caroline: 'I have been all my life in close touch with him and in agreement, and have had continuous correspondence all the time I have been away from the Cape, so that I shall feel his loss terribly.'⁹ And he summed up how he regarded this brother with whom he was on so similar a wavelength. 'I valued greatly his calm sound judgement of men and things, his unselfish way of regarding everything, his quiet and unostentatious discharge of his public duties, his unswerving honesty and high sense of honour and adherence to high principle.' Percy understood why Charlie had withdrawn from public life in 1910 at the founding of the Union of South Africa – it was because of 'his refusal to sacrifice any of his sound principles to the exigencies of party demands really injurious to the country's interests.' Percy also recognised another truth about him: it was 'owing to his retiring disposition' that he 'was too little appreciated'. In another letter, this time to his brother Frank, Percy referred to other aspects of Charlie's public work – on various public commissions, as Chairman of the Land Board (*Landraad*), and a member of the Land Bank. He had

⁴ Wallace Molteno to Barkly Molteno, 25 Jan. 1924.

⁵ Betty Molteno to Wallace Molteno, 20 Mar. 1924.

⁶ Betty Molteno to Caroline Murray, 13 Feb. 1924.

⁷ Mildred Molteno (nee Jones)'s letter, 25 Jan. 1924.

⁸ Betty Molteno to Lucy Molteno, 17 Mar. 1924, and to Caroline and Dr Murray, 19 Mar, 1924.

⁹ Percy Molteno to Caroline Murray, 24 Jan. 1924.

also organized the Cape Fruit Syndicate that developed the early export of deciduous produce overseas.¹⁰

Charlie had considerable parliamentary skills. Anna Purcell said he was one of the ablest speakers in the House of Assembly – ‘his speeches well thought out and his utterance clear, resonant and cultivated’. His friend and political colleague, John X. Merriman, who had been a minister in Charlie’s father’s cabinet in the 1870s and had become the last Prime Minister of the Cape, said Charlie was a much more natural public speaker than himself. And Olive Schreiner told Betty who was her great friend that Charlie should have been Cape Premier in 1899 rather than her brother, Will Schreiner. James also described Charlie in Parliament. ‘My brother had a good voice, heard plainly in every part of the House, and he had an earnest, distinguished manner that commanded attention.’¹¹ He recalled how, during the Suspension debate, Charlie had opposed the closing down of the Cape Parliament during the Boer War and accused the M.P.s in favour of it of wanting ‘the affairs of this country governed, not from Downing Street perhaps, but from the Stock Exchange. But it is far better that they should be poor and free, than rich and slaves.’ ‘I was proud of my brother,’ James went on. ‘All my public life and his, we worked together in harmony, and I can say that we never quarrelled once in our lives; but we tried to carry on the great traditions that we inherited from our father, the first Prime Minister of the Cape. My father was named the “The Lion of Beaufort”, and his eldest son, an ornament to public and country life, always trusted by whites and natives alike, simply the “Beaufort Boer”.’

What seems strange in the light of what an admirable man Charlie was is how quickly Lucy and the children seemed to have put him behind them. When he died, the extended family, including his numerous brothers and sisters and their offspring, assembled on the lawn at Sandown House and Lucy ‘appeared, deathly pale, clearly devastated’. But Charlie’s children had not been told how gravely ill he was and the ravages wrought by his last weeks were such that they were not allowed to see his body. The youngest, Virginia, who was only thirteen at the time, recollected the odd curtain of silence that descended in her immediate family. ‘Nothing was mentioned again’ and ‘her petite, impeccably mannered’ mother became ‘even more remote and distant than she naturally was.’¹² Both Virginia and Peter were still children at the time of their father’s death. Only Lucy and Carol had reached adulthood while John was nineteen and about to go to Cambridge. A few years after she, as we will see, was sent to Cheltenham Ladies College in England for her last year of secondary education and never returned to live at the Cape. Her elder sister, Lucy, also settled in England and married there. Their brothers, John Charles, often called ‘Ching’ as a boy and later ‘Long John’ because of his exceptional height, and Peter did live most of their lives in the Cape, but neither seems to have kept alive memories of their father among their descendants.

¹⁰ Percy Molteno to Frank Molteno, 26 Feb. 1924.

¹¹ James Molteno, *Further South African Reflections*, op. cit., pp. 36-7.

¹² Virginia Moody (nee Molteno) to her niece, Selina Cohen (nee Molteno), n.d.

Carol was the only exception. When she came to write her reminiscences, she included memories of her father, albeit tantalisingly few.¹³ Interestingly however, after completing her BA at the University of Cape Town, she did a thesis, and the topic she chose was clearly inspired by her father – the policy pursued by the British Government towards the ‘tribal natives’, 1830-1845.

Charlie did not die a wealthy man. His wife, Lucy, was left with a sufficient income to live modestly. But the five children did not inherit any significant sums and each one had to earn their own living in one way or another.

Tragedy strikes, June 1926 – Frank Molteno and the Salt River train crash

Some two years after Charlie’s death, Wallace Molteno happened to go into Beaufort West from the farm to get his car fixed. Next morning, just before breakfast, the hotel keeper where he was staying told him news had come in of a terrible railway accident the previous evening. It had happened 350 miles away on the Cape Peninsula suburban line at Salt River just outside the Cape Town city centre. Wallace knew that several members of the family, including his daughter Aimee (Joan) who was at Art School in Cape Town, used the line regularly to get to and from work. He hurried down to the station to get more information. On the way he met some people who told him a little more about what had happened, including the fact that a family friend, Sir Malcolm Searle, Judge President of the Cape, was among the dead. The Station Master had no further news, but let Wallace send a wire to the railway authorities asking for a casualty list since so many people in Beaufort were anxious about relatives and friends.

The full horror then became apparent. A list (still incomplete) was phoned through. The Station Master came out of his office and asked Wallace whether he was any relation of a Mr F. Molteno. Wallace knew at once it was his brother, Frank. He rushed to the Post Office and got through on the phone to Lil at Nelspoort. It was now 11.30. The train for Cape Town was leaving at 2pm. He and Lil agreed she should rush in to Beaufort straight away and they would catch the train. The Postmaster then brought Wallace a telegram confirming Frank’s death; it had been addressed to him at Nelspoort and sent at 8 a.m. that morning, but in the rush of telegrams it had only just got through to Beaufort West.

Lil and Wallace were now very anxious also about Aimee. What’s more, Betty Bisset, a cousin of Wallace’s, who happened to be staying with them on the farm, was worried about her father, James, and other members of the Bisset clan who also used the suburban railway every day. So all three of them got on the 2pm train. ‘All the railway officials were so kind and attentive and offered their sympathy; *everyone* knew and loved dear Frank’.¹⁴ Reaching Cape Town next morning – it was now Friday – they stayed with Jim Bisset where both Aimee and their youngest son, Teddy (Edward),

¹³ Carol Williamson (nee Molteno), *Recollections*, Ch 1, ‘My Childhood’, unpublished, but available at www.moltenofamily.net

¹⁴ This account is based on a letter Lil Molteno’s to her sister-in-law, Bessie Molteno, in England giving full details of what happened. Lil Molteno to Bessie Molteno, 15 Jun. 1926.

were boarding. Both youngsters had been in town that Wednesday and intending to catch the very train that had crashed, the Muizenberg Express. Luckily, Aimee had finished classes earlier than usual, run down the Avenue from Art School and caught the previous train. As for Teddy, he was seeing a doctor and had been kept there longer than expected, so also missed the 5.02 train.

Wallace and Lil went over to be with Frank's wife, Ella, as soon as possible. Extraordinarily, she had had in recent years to endure both her sons and her brother 'all taken in the same way, snatched from her in a moment',¹⁵ and now her husband, equally with no forewarning. Little wonder they found her 'sitting in a little crumpled heap in a chair, just murmuring that it had *got* to be borne, *got* to be borne'. She seemed to draw comfort from the letters and telegrams people were sending her. But she worried she had not heard from Victor and Mildred Molteno who were overseas still trying to get over the loss of their son, Harold, who had died the previous year in remote part of Burma prospecting for oil. Little did Ella or Lil know that within four weeks of the Salt River crash Victor also would be dead, snatched from his wife and family as utterly unexpectedly.

Brenda and Nesta, Ella and Frank's daughters, were proving towers of strength to their mother. Their husbands, Tommy Thomas and John Syme, 'were just like her own sons' and took responsibility for the funeral. And Ella's sister, Minnie Jones, came to stay, even sleeping with her at night.

The facts of the tragedy had now become clear. The coupling linking two of the express's coaches had broken and one coach had jumped the rails and rammed into the pillars of a bridge over the line. Fifteen people had been killed outright and many more injured. Cape Town was still quite a small community, and several of the victims being well-known, the crash was a great shock. Frank's injuries had been terrible, including a fractured skull, dislocated hips, and both legs having to be amputated that night in an effort to save him. Thankfully, Brenda said, he never regained consciousness and did not pull through.¹⁶

The funeral was conducted by the Archbishop of Cape Town with Wallace leading the mourners. Kathleen Murray described the scene: 'From Claremont House [Frank and Ella's home] to the Camp Ground Road church [St Thomas's two miles away] the streets were lined with little groups of people, the men with their hats off and many of the women weeping. I recognised many family Coloured servants and retainers, old Minna among them.'¹⁷ And Lil told Percy: 'The flowers were wonderful and it showed how deeply and universally dear Frank was loved *as every section of the community* [my italics] had expressed their sympathy in flowers.' Also the day he had died was St Barnabas' Day – Barnabas 'the son of consolation' – which, Lil said, was exactly what Frank always was to everyone he came in contact with.

Wallace, Lil went on, was 'heart-broken. He has lived such an isolated life [on remote farms in the Karoo] that he has not many friends'. Frank and Ella had just spent two weeks with them at

¹⁵ See Ch. 11. PUT IN CORRECT CHAPTER No. – THE NEXT GENERATION.

¹⁶ Brenda Thomas (nee Molteno) to her uncle, Percy Molteno, 24 Jun. 1926.

¹⁷ Kathleen Murray to Betty Molteno, 16 Jun. 1926.

Nelspoort prior to the accident. It had been such a happy time, now it could only be a precious memory.

One newspaper report gave a glimpse of the kind of man Frank was: 'Although of a retiring disposition, his influence and personality were inevitably felt, however much he endeavoured to avoid publicity. He had reached his early sixties and his still youthful walk and figure was a splendid example of a well-ordered life.' The paper went on to say: 'By profession Mr Molteno was a Government surveyor, and as long ago as 1890 he headed a deputation urging the government of the day to ... secure wide roads and the reservation of spaces for public recreation and parks.' 'His benefactions were known to all in the neighbourhood.'

None of this could diminish the terrible sorrow Ella suffered. As Brenda said, 'Our beloved Dad, always so kind, so good and so loving.... It's specially hard to bear for Mother, she's had so much sorrow, but always with him to help her through. She looks so pathetic, always looking down the avenue [at Claremont House], as if looking would bring him.' Ella recognised how she was feeling, but also what she had to do: 'One wants just to go down and down, and the daily fighting to be brave and keep up, hurts me. Life seems so different now without him – all brightness, happiness and interest gone. But I shall have to try and think of my other dear ones and for their sakes put self on one side and live for them. Frank would have done it, and I am going to do my best to do it too.'¹⁸

Tragedy strikes again, July 1926 – Vic Molteno

Ella in her grief had worried, as we saw, why she had not heard from Frank's brother, Victor. Within a couple of weeks of the funeral, the news of Vic's own unexpected death burst like a bombshell on the remaining sisters and brothers – Caroline, James and Wallace – and all the rest of the family at the Cape, and Betty, Percy and Barkly in England. What had happened was that Vic and his wife Mildred had been terribly stricken by the death of their son, also called Victor, at the end of the previous year. This loss possibly triggered Vic's decision to retire as District Surgeon of Wynberg the moment he turned 60 in April 1926. He and Mildred decided to take a trip to England, and see Percy and his family there, as well as Betty and other members of the clan.

Young Victor in Burma

Young Victor's death had been a dreadful blow. He was extremely bright; had got a place at Pembroke College, Cambridge; and become the first Molteno to take a Natural Science degree, specialising in Geology. Not only that, he got a First – much to his Uncle Percy's pleasure, Percy himself having got a First in the Maths Tripos at Trinity College 30 years before. At Cambridge young Victor had struck his cousin, Margaret (Percy and Bessie's daughter), as 'always cheery and entertaining with his geologist's hammer and discovery of garnets!'¹⁹

¹⁸ Writing two months after Frank's death, Ella Molteno to Percy Molteno, 18 Aug. 1926.

¹⁹ Margaret Murray (nee Molteno) to Caroline and Dr Murray, 24 Aug. 1921.

After taking his degree he left England for Rangoon where he had got a job with the Burmah Oil Company. This was September 1922 and the start of the soaring demand for petroleum as the mass market for motor vehicles developed following the First World War. Within weeks of his arrival, he got ill with an attack of dengue fever. Percy, who regarded him with great affection and felt responsible for him, sent him a book, *The Care of Health in the Tropics*, so that he could take better care of himself in future.²⁰

For the next three years Victor worked in Burma prospecting for oil. In late 1923 he was based near the coastal town of Akyab (now called Sittwe) a little south of today's border with Bangladesh. Percy told him that he worried he was 'being left alone in this part of the territory which you are exploiting'.²¹ Certainly, despite having 'quite an establishment of servants', it was tough. He was camping in the jungle. Moving his equipment to a new site, which was often necessary, took a 100 men although, if a river was nearby, it could all fit into two sampans. The humidity was dreadful and temperatures often in the 80s or 90s. In the rainy season more than 40 inches fell every month; for weeks on end it would pour every day. It must also have been a very lonely existence although he told his mother in early 1924 that he was making an effort to learn the language.²² And he described a delightful day he spent in one village on the Chang River modelling some animals out of mud, with the children having to guess what each one would turn out to be.

Then in late 1925 the news suddenly reached the Cape that he had died in this part of Burma on 13 November. For many weeks the family was in the dark as to what had caused his death.²³ His aunt, Betty Molteno, who had got to know and love him during his years at Cambridge, merely commented in her *Journal* (16 Feb. 1926): 'Gone was the dreamy, forgetful boy of bygone years who at times drove Aunt Bessie nearly distracted, but never seemed to worry Percy.' And Percy, in another example of his endless thoughtfulness for others, arranged for photos of Victor's grave in this remote part of Burma to be taken and sent to his mother in Cape Town, who by then was so unexpectedly a widow.

And now old Vic

Vic's deaths had come about in the following way. He and Mildred and their two daughters, Mary and Nance, reached England in June 1926. They had barely arrived however, and staying with Percy and Bessie, when he was taken gravely ill. Within a week or two he was dead, it seems of a brain tumour.²⁴ The date of his death, 10 July, was exactly four weeks after his brother Frank had been killed in the Salt River rail crash. It fell to Percy to arrange the funeral. Mildred liked the quiet little ceremony: 'all so simple and just as Victor would have liked ... a little church in the heart of lovely

²⁰ Percy Molteno to H. Victor Molteno, 14 Dec. 1922.

²¹ Percy Molteno to H. Victor Molteno, 4 Apr. 1923.

²² H. Victor Molteno to Mildred Molteno, 17 Jan. 1924.

²³ Letters in the Molteno-Murray Collection contain no hint of what had happened. University of Cape Town Library, Special Collections.

²⁴ Percy Molteno to Kenah Murray, 8 Jul. 1926.

Surrey – far from the heat and bustle of everyday life – and Victor was such a lover of Nature!’²⁵ She told Betty, with whom she got on so easily – admiring her for being ‘so tender towards the young people, always seeing the best in each one – ‘I do not think of “tragedy” in connection with his death.... The actual passing was so wonderful, and I believe he was only tired and longed to be with our dear H. Victor again.’ Her quiet religious faith also gave her a certain peace and sensibleness: ‘I see God’s hand in so much of my life and perhaps Victor has been saved a wearisome old age and ill-health.’²⁶

He was buried in the little churchyard at Peaslake which lay not far from Parklands. Mildred returned to Cape Town with her two girls where she was reunited with her youngest son, Charles, who was in his last year of school at Bishops. She continued to live in Kenilworth for the rest of her life. And on her death in January 1942, May Murray Parker commented: ‘We shall all miss Aunt Mildred. Another of our background pillars gone.... She was always so kind and true.’²⁷

Victor, or Vic as he was known among his friends, was ‘one of those unassuming, conscientious workers who steadily carry out their duties without fuss, flurry, or complaint. Of a kindly and genial nature, gentlemanly and courteous to all, he was much beloved.’²⁸ Sol Plaatje, a close friend of Betty’s and one of the leading Black South Africans in the early 20th century, wrote to her on Victor’s death: ‘As District Surgeon his work placed him in constant touch with the Native members of the Cape Peninsula. Dr Molteno was more than a physician; he was a personal guide to some and a veritable friend to many Cape Town Natives.’²⁹ Like all his brothers and sisters, Vic remained profoundly non-racial in his outlook, despite living in an age when the racism of almost all white South Africans was becoming ever more extreme and reflected in both how they behaved and public policy.

Betty Molteno – a peaceful passing

SS

1931 – Wallace’s death in Cape Town

Ss

Bessie Molteno (1933)

²⁵ Mildred Molteno to Betty Molteno, 26 Oct. 1926.

²⁶ Mildred Molteno to Betty Molteno, 16 Oct. 1926.

²⁷ May Murray Parker, 22 Jan. 1942.

²⁸ *Diocesan College Magazine*, O.D. Notes, Obituaries, ‘Dr Victor Grey Molteno’.

²⁹ Sol Plaatje to Betty Molteno, 16 Jun. 1926.

A last reunion – James Molteno’s visit to London (1936)

In the middle of 1936 James, now 71, decided to take ship for England and catch up with all the family there. He stayed, as usual, at Palace Court with Percy. There was no question, of course, of staying with Clare since they had long been totally separated. Nor was it comfortable to stay with his son, Vincent. James had seen very little of him since his posting to Simonstown in 1914-15, and in any case, Vincent and Eileen, with their daughter Pat, lived in only a modest flat. As for James’s eldest daughter, Clarissa, she and her husband, Brab Newcomen, who was now about to retire from the Army with the rank of Major, had no place of their own in London. All in all, it was much easier for James to stay with the brother he knew so well and who had been so supportive of him all his life. For nearly half a century indeed, the big house at No. 10 Palace Court with its entourage of domestics, just a 100 yards from Kensington Gardens, had welcomed and looked after member after member of the family coming over from the Cape.

James must have greatly enjoyed seeing everyone. In late August, he went to stay with Percy’s daughter, Margaret, and her husband Lenox Murray, on their farm at Painswick, nestling unspoilt in its valley in the Cotswolds. While there, he borrowed Percy’s car and chauffeur and went over to see Paul Batley, Ethel Molteno’s son, who was still a monk at Prinknash Abbey. This was something he always did when in England, although, when younger, he would ‘as it were, drop in while out walking’. This time, however, the monks were in a retreat and a notice on the door made clear visitors could not be received. He wandered round for a bit and looked out down over the Severn Valley stretching miles across to the Welsh hills, and was lucky enough to bump into the Sub-Prior. Father Columba Stenson had actually been born in Kimberley in the Cape. He recognised James from earlier visits, and despite being in retreat took him off to Paul’s workshop.

Paul ‘always had a great love for Uncle James’.³⁰ He showed him around the various bits of agricultural equipment, including a new-fangled motor hay mower Barkly had told James about. But it was an old hearse that particularly attracted James’s attention. He kept referring to it, and before leaving mentioned it again, ‘adding I shall soon want a hearse’. Paul hastened to reassure him that his time was not yet, little knowing what was to happen. James got back safely to Palace Court in London, but almost at once had a severe heart attack. He never regained consciousness and died a few days later.

Paul was deeply struck by what had happened. He knew James wasn’t religious. But he remembered how during his recent visit James had ‘found himself speaking of politics but stopped himself abruptly saying “I don’t want to speak of politics any more, that is all over”.’ Paul could not help feeling that James must have been ‘thinking of God and the world to come’. ‘There is nothing at Prinknash or in me,’ Paul told James’s brother. Barkly, ‘that particularly should have attracted him except the one thing: we are God’s servants and a visit to us was perhaps a half-unconscious groping towards Him.’

³⁰ Paul Batley to his stepfather, Barkly Molteno, whom he always addressed as ‘My dear father’ when writing to him, 16 Sep. 1936.

The practical arrangements for the funeral fell to James's ever-loving niece, May Murray Parker. She had just received 'the great blow' of her brother Jarvis Murray's death – 'he and I had been very close friends'. But the funeral arrangements for James were a task she was glad to undertake because 'I loved Uncle James very dearly.'³¹

One thing is rather striking. He died far away from the beloved Cape where he had spent his entire adult life. His brothers there were all dead by this time.³² In England, by contrast, he was surrounded during what turned out to be the last weeks of his life by his two surviving brothers, Percy and Barkly, and only sister still alive, Caroline. It was almost as though he had hastened to England in order to be part of a final gathering together of his remaining family whose lives had been so intimately entwined one with another for so many, many years. Within a year of his death, Percy and Caroline would also be dead; May once again taking charge of the necessary funeral arrangements; and only Barkly, the youngest of that generation, remaining – the last, and lonely, survivor.

The funeral service for James was held on 19 September 1936 in the tiny church of St Mark's situated in the Surrey woods near Peaslake where he was buried beside his brother Victor. All the members of the family in England were present, including Clare (listed as Lady Molteno because of James's knighthood). Looking round the little congregation, one could not really miss the enduring cataclysm [OR SHALL I SAY 'scars'?] of the First World War – there was Lt.-Commander Vincent Molteno, who had been in the Royal Navy throughout and served on the East African coast, at Gallipoli and as a sub-mariner in the Atlantic; Vice-Admiral Barkly Molteno who had fought in the Battle of Jutland; Major Brab Newcomen, James's son-in-law who had been so badly wounded on the Western Front; Margaret Murray, whose first husband – her cousin George Murray – had been killed while serving in the Artillery on the Western Front within days of their marriage; and her second husband, Lenox, who had fought throughout the War in East Africa; and Col. Ernest Anderson, another nephew of James's who had served as the Medical Officer of his Guards regiment in France for the duration.

In an act of caring thoughtfulness for all those members of the family in South Africa who could not be there, May chose particular flowers she thought would be meaningful to each of them. The list of 42 wreaths was a roll call of Moltenos, Murrays, Andersons, Bisets, Blenkins, Thomases and Thompsons – all related one to another.³³

A Summing up

What are we to make of James and his life? Here is what Percy wrote of him shortly after the funeral:³⁴

³¹ May Murray Parker to her niece, Lorna Thompson (nee Murray), 12 Nov. 1936.

³² He still had, of course, his much younger half-brothers there – Ted, Clifford and Harry Molteno.

³³ The List, giving each family member's name and the particular flowers each wreath consisted of, is in the University of Cape Town Special Collections, BC 330, Box 71.

³⁴ Reproduced in Francis Hirst's life of Percy Molteno, *A Man of Principle*, op. cit.

An altogether exceptional member of the family [and] quite unlike the others. At school and university he was not only proficient in examinations, but excelled at games and took a leading part in the social life of Trinity [College, Cambridge] and in the debates of its Union, of which he became President. He had a great zest for life and most of its pleasures – cricket, hunting, tennis, swimming, racing and cards. He took immense interest in everybody and everything, making as he passed through life many friends – and, of course, a few enemies. A love of politics and public life were in his blood, and in party strife he proved himself a valiant and at times a hot partisan.

And yet, and yet, there was perhaps more brotherly loyalty than good judgement in this summing up. James was brilliant no doubt, but somehow he never really lived up to the early potential he had shown, and by the age of fifty his public life was over. He certainly loved public speaking – within weeks of going up to Cambridge, he told Betty how he had spoken at a Union debate for a solid 40 minutes, adding rather pompously: ‘I think it of great importance to learn to speak in public easily and fluently’³⁵ – this in some disregard of an audience’s capacity to listen so long! And he had a prodigious memory, more so than any of his brothers and sisters; he claimed to have written his two volumes of reminiscences without consulting a note! And he loved sport and was a reasonably competent cricketer in his youth: when the rail link between Cape Town and Port Elizabeth was finally completed in 1884 he was a member of the Western Province team that played in the first inter-colonial cricket tournament to mark the occasion.

But his life was marred by much sadness and even failure. He and Clare had been trapped in a disastrous marriage. She took the children off to England when they were still very young. And since his whole life was bound up with politics in the Cape, he had very little to do with them as they grew up and little contact even then.

In politics, too, he was seriously disappointed. He was principled, indeed courageous, during the first 18 years of his parliamentary career, but his irrepressible sense of humour and levity of manner meant that his colleagues tended not to take his views seriously or see him as a potential leader.³⁶ An even bigger obstacle was the descent of Cape politics in the dominant white community into Afrikaner nationalism, British jingoism and anti-Black racism. He never held ministerial office as a result. Recognising these realities perhaps, or simply exhausted by his struggles during the Boer War, he withdrew from active politics. Accepting the Speakership of the Cape Parliament in 1908 and two years later of the first South African Parliament meant he opted out, when still in his early 40s, from the critically important issues that dominated politics from the moment the four British colonies came together in the Union of South Africa in 1910.³⁷

Percy referred to James making many friends during his life. But there is a world of difference between superficial interactions – whether it be political colleagues, playing bridge or going to the races (all of which he did) – and deep friendships that nourish. While his brothers and sisters, and

³⁵ James Molteno to Betty Molteno, 22 Jul 1884. UCT Special Collection, BC601, Box 4.

³⁶ Ralph Kilpin, *Old Cape House, being pages from the history of a Legislative Assembly*, Cape Town, Maskew Miller, 1918.

³⁷ His papers, as well as some of his brother Percy, were given to the South African Library. I have not been able to consult them.

his niece, May Murray Parker, remained loyal to him and he greatly valued the warmth and welcoming homes they provided, in the end he was a lonely man. And how many people would really have agreed with Paul Batley when he wrote that 'Uncle James ... had always been a self-sacrificing servant of others. His whole career has been devoted to furthering the good of his fellow men in the way that seemed to him best'? As for James's own children and their descendants (Patricia Molteno and John and Russell Mays, and their children), incredibly little was remembered, and even less with admiration or affection.

A Personal Note

FINAL POSSIBLE PARAGRAPH (Over emotional, perhaps. And perhaps it does not belong at the end of this chapter which is not quite the end of the book).

I must add a personal note to this chapter that has ended with the deaths of all but one of Sir John Molteno's sons and daughters. I have spent so many years living with them in my head and have got to know them so well. And I have grown not just to admire them, but to feel a great affection for them. Their deaths, though so long ago, compel in me a sense of great loss. What I have written has tried always to be accurate and free of romanticism, and to set their lives in the context of their time and place that people today will understand. But, in the end, this book is an act of love. And bizarre as it may seem, an attempt to thank all those who have gone before us along the paths of life.