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# Unremembered – but not forgotten

**G. W. Keeton James: *A Liberal Attorney-General; Being the Life of Lord Robson of Jesmond, 1852–1918, with an Account of the Office of Attorney-General, etc.* (Nisbet & Co, 1949)**

**Reviewed by Robert Ingham**

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Who remembers the government's law officers? The post-war lists of Attorneys-General and Solicitors-General are dominated by distinguished but little-known law men (no women, yet). There are a few highlights. Sir Hartley Shawcross, one of the last surviving members of Attlee's governments, is famous for his comment 'We are the masters now'; Geoffrey Howe and Patrick Mayhew served as law officers before establishing their reputations in other, more politically sensitive, positions; Sir Nicholas Lyell is famous for his role in the Matrix Churchill affair; former Liberal MP Sir Dingle Foot became Solicitor-General in the 1966 Wilson administration before resigning over British policy in Southern Rhodesia; and Sir Harry Hylton Foster served for five years as Solicitor-General before becoming Speaker of the House of Commons. But who remembers Sir Lionel Heald, Sir Reginald Manningham-Buller or Sir Peter Rawlinson? And who can name the current law officers, one of whom is the first peer ever to hold the office of Attorney-General?

Despite their obscurity, the law officers play a vital role in advising ministers on the legal complexities of legislative proposals and on the myriad legal problems which government departments encounter from day to day. In the present era this role is performed behind the scenes, but in decades past the law officers were more prominent parliamentarians, required to provide advice on the detailed wording of bills and proposed amendments on the floor of the House of Commons. The pre-1939 list of law officers reflects this differ-

ence, including parliamentarians of the stature of F. E. Smith, Edward Carson, John Simon, Rufus Isaacs and Douglas Hogg. Among this distinguished list is the name of Sir William Robson, Solicitor-General from 1905 to 1908 and Attorney-General from 1908 to 1910.

Robson was born in 1852, the son of a prosperous Newcastle-upon-Tyne businessman. After Cambridge he entered the legal profession, becoming a barrister in 1888, a Queen's Counsel in 1892, and sitting as Recorder of Newcastle from 1895 to 1905. Aside from the law, his passion was politics. Deeply affected by the slums of his native city, he was for his time an 'advanced' Liberal, a key proponent of social legislation to ensure that economic freedom complemented political liberty, and an active seeker of a constituency in the north-east of England.

While based in London he was briefly the Member for Bow & Bromley in the 1885 parliament, but he disliked carpet-bagging and in 1892 stood for Middlesbrough. The constituency was one of the earliest in which Labour candidates took on the Liberal establishment and after a bitter battle Robson lost to the seamen's leader J. Havelock Wilson. One of the most interesting aspects of Keeton's book is the insights it gives into the development of the Labour movement in north-east England and its attitude to the Liberal Party.

Robson was elected Member for South Shields in 1895, but even in this staunchly Liberal constituency he faced a continual battle to prevent independent Labour candidates from opposing him, and he was deeply pessimistic about the Liberal Party's long-term prospects in the face of an organised Labour challenge.

Robson marked himself out as a rising star in the Liberal Party during the 1895 Parliament by his speeches on legal questions and by piloting the Children's Act, a private member's bill, on to the statute book. When Campbell-Bannerman became Prime Minister in 1905 he was disappointed not to be made Attorney-General, but as Solicitor-General he embarked on an exhausting five-year career as a law officer, being promoted to Attorney-General by Asquith in 1908. Keeton brings out well the pivotal role played in the House by law officers at that time. It would not have done for ministers to promise to write to members who raised difficult questions about legislative proposals. Robson served long hours on the Treasury bench providing accurate off-the-cuff responses to complex queries.

He was also responsible for several minor but technical pieces of legislation and represented the Government in numerous legal cases. These are reported rather too prominently by Keeton. A whole chapter is devoted to an intricate case concerning fishing rights in the North Atlantic which, although important in its day and a great triumph for Robson, is only of limited interest now. A general criticism of Keeton's book is that it dwells rather too much on Robson's legal career and the history of the position of Attorney-General at the expense of information about Robson's personal and political lives. The result is a volume which, although informative and entertaining, is somewhat unsatisfying.

Robson's life reached a sad conclusion. He was junior spokesman to Lloyd George during the long passage through Parliament of the 1909 Finance Act. While Lloyd George dealt with the broad outline of the contentious bill, Robson was responsible for the mass of detail it contained. His constitution, never robust, was broken by the long hours he spent in the House of Commons. Forced to retire from politics, he was created Lord Robson of Jesmond in 1910 and made a Lord of Appeal. Unable to recover his health fully, he retired in 1912 and died six years later.

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