

THE MIRROR

A REFLEX OF THE LIGHT AND LEADING OF THE WEEK;

CONTAINING ARTICLES, ORIGINAL AND SELECTED, ON

Politics, Social Questions, Literature, Science, Art, Music, and the Drama.

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[ONE PENNY.]

Our Picture Gallery.

NO. II.—LORD PROVOST ESSLEMONT.

MR PETER ESSLEMONT, the present Lord Provost of Aberdeen, is perhaps the youngest man who has ever held that high and honourable position. There is not a gray hair on his head, for he is in the prime of life, being only in the 47th year of his age. Nobody who knows anything of Mr Esslemont's abilities and his devotion to municipal affairs could have doubted, even years ago, that the Provostship would sooner or later be within his grasp. That he has attained it sooner rather than later is due in a large measure to the untimely death of Mr Robert Urquhart two days after the memorable election of 1877, on the very night when the new Council was to meet to distribute the offices. By Mr Urquhart's death the leadership of what, for want of a better definition, may still be called "the party of progress," naturally devolved on Mr Esslemont, and he has now, by something like natural succession, acquired the post of Chief Magistrate, which would undoubtedly have been held by Mr Urquhart, if, indeed, he would not have secured it three years ago. But Mr Esslemont's early tenure of the Provostship is also due to his early participation in municipal politics, and in that respect inculcates a lesson too apt to be neglected. There is a superstition abroad that public life is open only to the wealthy and the leisured classes—to those who have "made their pile," and have therefore time to devote themselves to other people's affairs. The consequence is that most of our public boards are crowded with greybeards and dotards, and that many young men are frightened away from taking what is their legitimate share in public life. Lord Provost Esslemont's career deals the superstition an ugly blow.

That career began a little over eleven years ago at the famous election of 1869, when the purchase of Torry Farm by the Town Council was the question of the hour. Mr Esslemont allied himself with those favouring the purchase, the party of progress, then headed by Mr J. W. Barclay, Mr Urquhart, and Mr Leslie. The amalgamation of the Police Board and the Town Council and the purchase of the Gas Company by the Corporation were also then under consideration, and to these subjects Mr Esslemont devoted much time and attention, he being a keen advocate of both proposals. On the gas question, indeed, he became an authority, and after Mr Urquhart's death he acted as Convener of the Gas Committee. He interested himself in many other details of municipal administration, and notably in the numerous and perplexing questions arising

in connection with the Guildry and their funds; and on becoming a Magistrate he did his fair share of work on the bench, avoiding many of the pitfalls that lie there for the unwary. Latterly, Mr Esslemont has taken a very prominent part in Town Council business, especially in the vexed question of the bells, but his greatest achievement was defeating the bill for a new constitution promoted by the elected Harbour Commissioners in 1879. He opposed the proposal in all its preliminary stages with marked astuteness and ability, and when the scene of the conflict was transferred to a committee room of the House of Commons, Mr Esslemont was the inspiring genius of the opposing counsel. To him is wholly due the merit of defeating a project which would have had disastrous effects to both harbour and municipality had it been carried out. Mr Esslemont has also taken a very prominent, if not the chief, part in the reconstruction of Gordon's Hospital. In that matter he showed, almost for the first time in his life, a disposition to compromise, and there have not been wanting signs of late that in other respects he is becoming more yielding and complaisant, and less insistent on his own policy, which latter has hitherto been a strongly-marked characteristic of his, and has made for him many enemies.

Mr Esslemont was born at Balnakettle, Udny, on 13th June 1834. His father was a farmer there, but subsequently removed to Shields, Belhelvie. When a lad of sixteen Mr Esslemont was apprenticed to Mr (afterwards Baillie) William Shirres, wholesale draper and manufacturer, Aberdeen, and in less than four years became his traveller. He remained with Mr Shirres for about eight years, and then started business as a draper on his own account in the spring of 1858. He has had more than one shop and more than one partner, but the "Broadgate" has been the street in which he has mainly carried on business, and in conjunction with his present partner, Mr Macintosh, his business has largely developed. Mr Esslemont first entered the Town Council in 1869, being elected for the Second Ward along with the deceased Baillie Robb, the two Torry Farm candidates, defeating Mr Joseph Wood and Mr Stephen, the painter. He was re-elected for this Ward at the "general" election of 1871 consequent on the passing of the Municipality Extension Act, and had again to submit to re-election in 1872. He was appointed to the magistracy in 1871, and succeeded to the Senior Baillieship in 1874, Mr Jamieson being then elected Provost. Mr Esslemont withdrew from the Council at the next election period, November 1875, being the only member retiring on that occasion who did not invite re-election. He then served a term of three years on the