

**NIGEL SCOTLAND**

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# **Methodism and the English Labour Movement 1800-1906**

**Nigel Scotland traces the considerable religious impact upon the emerging Labour movement in the nineteenth Century, in particular that of varieties of Methodism. He charts its influence not only in reforming legislation and the formation of political parties, culminating in the foundation of the Labour Party in 1906, but also in other organisations and movements like Trades Unions, Chartists and the Co-operative Movement. Moreover, Methodist principles of organisation and mobilisation had a significant part to play in the success of these growing movements.**

THE LABOUR MOVEMENT is not something which is easy to define in precise terms but it can adequately be described 'as a broad-based endeavour for the betterment of men and women of the working classes'. It began in the early years of the nineteenth century and culminated in the birth of the Labour Party at the start of the twentieth. The English Labour Movement was not in itself explicitly religious but it was nevertheless permeated by religion both in its origin and in its subsequent development. Its roots lay in three areas in particular: the French revolutionary spirit of 'liberty, fraternity and equality', early Owenite socialism and John Wesley's Methodist religion of the poor.

Voltaire's watchwords were taken up by English radicals such as William Cobbett (1736-1835), Tom Paine (1737-1809) and Francis Place (1771-1854) whose writings and campaigning produced a seedbed of democracy. Robert Owen's (1771-1858) contribution was to inject the equation with the socialist ideals of co-operation and state ownership. The focus of this study however is the role and contribution of the third factor of Methodism. It is of course fully acknowledged that other religious traditions played significant roles but the Methodist contribution has been singled out since it was clearly the most significant. By focusing on Methodism in particular, it is possible to gauge more clearly the role and function of religion in working class movements.

## **John Wesley**

John Wesley (1703-1791) experienced his evangelical conversion in 1738 and this event totally changed his perspective on life. His new found assurance of faith and the experience of 'the love God shed abroad in his heart' issued in a religion of compassion and concern for the lower orders. Wesley on numerous occasions described himself as 'God's steward of the poor'. Every Methodist Society was

organised into small classes of twelve or thirteen members whose duty it was to contribute a penny a week to be used to help the poor and needy. As well as his relentless and tireless preaching, Wesley worked to the end of his days for the disadvantaged, campaigning for better conditions of work, collecting money, food and clothing on their behalf. In addition he raised a vigorous protest against slavery and concerned himself with such issues as the condition of the mines, enclosure of the common land, drunkenness, prostitution and the education of the poor.

John Wesley's religion which combined evangelical proclamation and social action took deep root among the towns and cities of the new manufacturing areas of the country. His societies embraced perhaps as many as 100,000 by the time of his death in 1791 though it has been suggested that four times that figure may have been associated with his movement as 'hearers' or uncommitted worshippers. Wesley's Arminian religion helped to counteract the fatalism which attached to the Calvinistic theologies of both Anglican and the older dissenting groups. His doctrine of the witness of the Holy Spirit provided marginal people groups with an affirmation that they were loved and valued by God. In addition, Wesley's stress on the 'priesthood of all believers' and the infinite value of each individual before God began to generate social action. Working men and women reasoned that if God loved and valued them, so should their employers and those 'set in authority over them'.

These facts notwithstanding, by no means all historians have been willing to accord Methodism a positive role in the origin and development of working class movements. Edward P. Thompson (1924-1993) the Marxist historian, urged that the contribution of Methodism was 'dysfunctional'. As he saw it Methodism was a form of 'moral machinery' to complement and stand alongside industrial machinery. In his view it made people passive before temporal authority, its conferences were very conservative and reactionary and Methodist factory managers were observed to exert a strong work discipline over their labour force. In addition, Thompson pointed out how Methodism held people's loyalties because it preached that Salvation was conditional. One way of avoiding a 'backslidden' condition was to pursue one's calling with diligence and for long hours. Methodism, he also maintained, confiscated people's emotional energies so that instead of being channelled into protest against social injustice they were evaporated in sporadic watchnights, love feasts and revival gatherings. Again, because Methodism siphoned off people's emotional energy in this way Thompson used the word 'masturbation' to describe it. He commented: "The word is unpleasant; but it is difficult not to see in Methodism in these years a ritualised form a psychic masturbation."<sup>1</sup> Because working men and women were deprived of their physical vitality in this way, they became the compliant workhorses of the industrial revolution. Why did they not break free from such a repressive stranglehold we might be tempted to ask? Thompson's reply was that they had been indoctrinated by the Sunday Schools, offered a secure refuge with close-knit camaraderie, been stunned by the emotional violence of high voltage religious experience and guaranteed a secure future Southcottian style compensation where all social ills would be righted.

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1 *The Making of the English Working Class*, Gollancz, London 1963, p 406.

Thompson's piece has been regarded by many as the classic indictment of evangelical religion. However, subsequent historians have interpreted the evidence otherwise and reached the conclusion that Methodism in all its branches did in fact engender protest. Eric Hobsbawm for example, whose view of history was also an essentially Marxist one, assessed that matter very differently from Thompson. In his *Captain Swing* he saw within Methodism an important element of protest. The very act of ordinary people setting up a chapel and absenting themselves from church represented an act of considerable independence. Hobsbawm also noted that substantial numbers of socialist leaders came from a background of teenage conversion and lay preaching. The Methodist preaching on which they had been nurtured, he suggested, fostered in them an element of protest. 'It made', he wrote, 'all who took to it like the ancient prophets, a stiff-necked people unwilling to bow down to the House of Rimmon'.<sup>2</sup> Professor W. R. Ward made similar observations seeing in Methodism, including Wesleyan Methodism, an 'inherent radicalism' which challenged 'the paternalistic Anglican establishment'.<sup>3</sup> Ward demonstrated by a detailed examination of primary source material that whilst the Wesleyan conferences were Tory, reactionary and against political involvement, at the local level there was much radical activity.<sup>4</sup> Ward also pointed to the radical nature of Wesleyan Sunday Schools and the Leeds secession which indicated a strong level of protest.<sup>5</sup> Anthony Armstrong who published *The Church of England, the Methodists and Society 1700-1850* in 1973 laid stress on Wesley's reformist activities, particularly his campaigns against slavery and prison brutality. He also underscored the radical implications of Wesley's field preaching, his breaches of the parochial system and the ways in which radical working class organisations adopted Methodist organisational models.<sup>6</sup> Bernard Semmel developed the radical implications of John Wesley's theology which was essentially 'a liberal, progressive ideology' which helped to move the English people from a traditional to a modern society. Whilst he readily acknowledged that the Methodist revolution strengthened 'motives for obedience and subordination', Semmel nevertheless contended that Wesley offered an English religious and democratic revolution which paralleled the French political revolution.<sup>7</sup> Other more recent writers such as Alan Gilbert, David Hempton and Hugh McLeod have all similarly regarded Methodism as having a positive role in regard to working class movements.<sup>8</sup> Taken as a whole therefore the work of historians subsequent to Thompson has argued that Methodism functioned in an active and motivating way in the emergence and development of working class social and political movements.

2 E. P. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, Manchester UP, Manchester 1971, p 139.

3 W. R. Ward, *Religion and Society 1790-1850*, Batsford, London 1972, p 75.

4 See for example *Religion and Society*, pp 86, 93.

5 *Religion and Society*, pp 137-140.

6 A. Armstrong, *The Church of England, the Methodists and Society 1700-1850*, University of London Press, London 1973, p 195.

7 B. Semmel, *The Methodist Revolution*, Heinemann, London 1974, pp 193, 198.

8 See for example A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England 1740-1914* Longman, London 1976, pp 82-85; D. Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society, 1750-1850*, Hutchinson, London 1984, pp 87, 211-213; Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the Working Class in Nineteenth Century England*, Macmillan, London 1984, p 52.

## The organisational arms of the Labour Movement

The Labour Movement whose interaction with Methodism these writers have concerned themselves, had a number of organisational arms. These were Parliamentary Reform, Trade Unionism, Co-operatives, the Labour Churches, Robert Blatchford's Clarion movement and the formation of the Independent Labour Party and the Labour Party. In each of these Methodism in its various branches had varying degrees of influence. Prominent among them were the movements for Parliamentary Reform. In general terms these were pressure groups some of which were promoted from within the House of Commons by reforming MPs as well as from outside by secular radicals and men and women of religious convictions. The main concerns were the *Repeal of the Combination Acts* 1825, the *Abolition of Slavery* 1833, the *Series of Factory Acts* of which the *Ten Hours Act* of 1847 was crucial and the campaign for Universal Suffrage.

Trade Unions became increasingly important during the years 1825-81 following the *Repeal of the Combination Acts* in 1825. The early period witnessed a brief crescendo with the rise and then collapse of Robert Owen's *Grand National Consolidated Trades Union*. Most of the early Trade Unions of the 1830s and 40s were combinations of skilled or semi-skilled workers. They tended to act on more conventional lines by negotiation rather than by strike action. The earlier unionism was also characterised by friendly and benefit societies for their membership. After 1881 however there developed what is often misleadingly termed the 'New Unionism'. These were generally speaking unions of unskilled workers such as the *Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Labourers Union* and the *Transport Workers Union* and *The General Worker's Union*. Often these unions did not have benefit organisations attaching to them.

Another significant prong of the nineteenth century working class activism was the Co-operative Movement which had its roots in the activities of Robert Owen of New Lanark. Two kinds of co-operation began to emerge: work co-operatives and food co-operatives. Owen experimented with both. The beginnings of the food co-operatives in England are generally regarded as dating from 1844 when the followers of Robert Owen at Rochdale, 'the Rochdale Pioneers', established a chain of co-operative stores. The organisation spread very widely in England in the later years of the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth century.

The founding of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) by Kier Hardie in 1893 was of major significance for the Labour Movement. It marked the first step towards a distinctively labour voice in parliament. Hardie (1856-1915) who came from a mining background was National Secretary to the Scottish mine workers. It was in that context that he gained his experience of public speaking and political work. He entered Parliament in 1893.

The Labour Party was formed as a separate organisation in 1906. In 1900 the first Labour Representation Committee was founded with a view to getting specifically 'Labour' working men into Parliament. The celebrated 'Taff Vale Decision' of 1901 was a major factor in helping to achieve this objective. The Taff Vale Railway Company sued the 'Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants' for repayments suffered by the company owing to a strike. The case passed right through the courts to the House of Lords who decided against the union who were

then made to pay £23,000 in compensation. The cheque is still preserved in the archives of the National Union of Railwaymen. The 1906 General Election provided the Liberals with thirty unwanted avowedly Labour MPs who in that year formed the Labour Party. For a while the ILP continued as a party within a party, but eventually most of its members transferred into the new organisation.

Together these organisations and groups formed the active limbs of the nineteenth century British Labour Movement. It is now the purpose of this article to examine the role and influence which Methodism in its various branches played within them.<sup>9</sup> It was a role which was both a general and a specific one. The first section examines the more diffusive influences of Methodism. This is then followed by a focus on the Methodist impact on particular facets of the Labour Movement.

### Grass roots Methodist radicalism

Wesleyan Methodism, at least at the official ministerial level, was hostile to almost all forms of radicalism and working class protest. Official conference resolutions forbade Methodist preachers from taking part in public meetings and it was forbidden to use Church property for trade union or political meetings. The Primitive Methodist conference of 1835 for example, asked the question: 'What is the order of Conference relative to public speechifying or politics?' To which the answer was returned: 'That none of our travelling preachers be allowed to make speeches at political meetings: nor at Parliamentary elections. And it is strongly recommended to our local preachers to avoid such things.' The Conference also asked a further question: 'How shall the cause of piety be further guarded from injury?' To which the answer was made: 'That none of our chapels or preaching rooms be lent on any account for either political or religious controversy.'

However as the decades passed, at the local level, Methodism in all its branches began to depart widely from this precedent. Not only did large numbers of local preachers enter the political arena as leaders and speakers, so too did their ministers. W. R. Ward for instance, observed that as early as 1812 it was clear that there were Wesleyans involved in a radical Trade Union Brotherhood in the South Shields area. Again, towards the end of the second decade attempts were made to suppress William Stephenson, a local preacher and young schoolmaster at Burton Colliery, from political speechmaking.<sup>10</sup> A detailed study of Methodism and agricultural trade unions in East Anglia revealed the widespread extent of this rejection of official conference protocol. In the counties of Suffolk, Norfolk and Lincolnshire chapels were used for union meetings on numerous occasions and four hundred and eighty six district and local union leaders were identified as Methodists. Many were local preachers and office holders.<sup>11</sup> Even full time circuit preachers were prepared to throw in their lot behind the labourers in defiance of their conference. Thus the Revd. E. Sibcey, a Wesleyan Methodist minister, spoke in

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9 The main offshoots of Methodism studied in this article are the Methodist New Connexion formed in 1797, the Primitive Methodists found in 1811, the Bible Christians established in 1815 and the

Wesleyan Reformers who emerged most strongly after 1848.

10 Ward, *Religion*, pp 86, 93.

11 See N. A. D. Scotland, *Methodism and the Revolt of the Field in East Anglia 1872-1896*, Alan Sutton, Gloucester 1970, p 84, 58.

favour of the proceedings at a meeting held on the bowling green of the Star Inn at Aylsham for the purpose of forming a union branch.<sup>12</sup>

All Christian churches to some extent were educators of working class men and women. Not only did the churches make a major contribution through the building of primary day schools, their Sunday Schools were of major importance since they frequently taught simple reading, writing and arithmetic on the Lord's Day. Much of the initiative behind the Sunday Schools was due to the Methodists of all sections. David Hempton made the point that 'Methodists were particularly active in the early stages of the Sunday School movement and accounted for thirty per cent of all Sunday School scholars by 1851'.<sup>13</sup> A. Ainsworth noted the great strength of Methodist Sunday Schools in nineteenth century Lancashire. 'Usually managed by ordinary mill workers', he observed, 'Methodist schools in some places exceeded the total provision of all other denominations.'<sup>14</sup> Ainsworth's point is of general significance because the 1851 Census of Religion demonstrated that the Methodist presence was considerably greater than the Church of England's in the large manufacturing towns and cities from which many of the radical working class movements emerged.

It was the case that the Wesleyans ruled against writing on the Lord's Day which they interpreted as secular instruction. However, although many, probably the majority, of Wesleyan Sunday Schools complied with the injunction, there were significant numbers who did not. W. R. Ward has shown that in practice many Wesleyan Sunday Schools in the north of England did not obey Jabez Bunting's ruling on the matter.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the Wesleyans, the Primitive Methodists continued the practice of Sunday writing. Many labour leaders testified to the fact that Methodist Sunday School represented the sum total of their formal education. George Edwards (1851-1933) for example who founded the National Union of Allied and Agricultural Workers in 1906 wrote of his Sunday School days: 'This was the only schooling I ever had.'<sup>16</sup> William Waters, another Norfolk Methodist and union activist like Edwards, was unable to read until he started as a local preacher and his wife began to teach and prompt him as he gave his first sermons.<sup>17</sup> The fact that so many labour leaders were able to testify that their education was in Sunday School certainly argues against the view that Sunday Schools operated as an instrument of social control.

## Methodist management skills

One of the great contributions which Methodism made to the Labour Movement was in providing a school for managerial skills and speaking opportunities. Methodism, unlike the other non-conformist churches, gave much greater scope and facilities to lay people to take responsibility. Many Methodist circuits had thirty or forty chapels and only one or two travelling preachers who did most of their

12 *Norfolk News*, 18 May 1872.

13 Hempton, *Methodism*, p 90.

14 A. Ainsworth, 'Religion in the Working Class Community, and the Evolution of Socialism in Late Nineteenth Century Lancashire: A

Case of Working Class Consciousness'

*Histoire Sociale* 10 (1977), p 362.

15 Ward, *Religion*, pp 137-140.

16 *Primitive Methodist Magazine*, 1895, pp 305-307.

17 *Primitive Methodist Leader*, 8 December 1810.

preaching at the head church of the circuit. The great bulk of preaching therefore fell to ordinary working men and, in some cases women. For this reason Methodism trained people in the art of standing up in public and speaking. The chapel committees, circuit meetings and business sessions all also gave labouring people the chance to debate issues and to learn to get their point across. Labourers who held office as chapel stewards learned to manage money and handle financial matters. They also grasped how to arrange meetings and to produce minutes and resolutions. David Hempton among many others, has underscored this fact that 'there was within the Methodist structure ample scope for individual self-improvement to find institutional expression'.<sup>18</sup> It was through activities such as class meetings, public speaking, Sunday School teaching, management of people, finance and chapel fabric that, he maintained, 'Methodists were able to hold places of influence in local trade unions out of all proportion to their numerical strength'.<sup>19</sup>

### Methodist organisation

One of the particular contributions which Methodism made to the Labour Movement was in providing models of organisation for working class societies and trade unions. In one sense this was to be expected since the majority of their leaders were Methodists and they naturally turned for structural patterns to those of their own church which they knew best. Wesleyan Methodism and its major offshoots all operated on a three tiered system of National Conference, district circuits and local chapels. Most trade unions adopted this pattern with a national annual conference and then geographical union districts with a district chairman, secretary and treasurer. At the local level there were branches each with their own chairman, secretary and treasurer. Most union members paid a weekly subscription which was derived from Wesley's earlier insistence that each member of his societies should contribute one penny a week for the needs of the poor. In many cases the chapel also became the place where working class organisations held their meetings and did their business. Indeed, to this day, local trade union branch meetings are often still referred to as 'the chapel'.

It sometimes happened that Methodist circuits became the base on which the whole of a union district sprang up. For example in the Cirencester district of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union which was established in the 1870s all of the new branches were formed in villages where there was already an existing Primitive Methodist chapel. An earlier study demonstrated that out of 604 agricultural trade union branches in the counties of Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Suffolk 535 were located in towns and villages where there was already a Methodist chapel.<sup>20</sup> Primitive Methodist circuits frequently helped to link trade union branches and districts together and this was often a substantial aid in maintaining solidarity during periods of strike action. During the 'Great Lock Out' of agricultural labourers in East Anglia in 1874 the National Agricultural Labourers' Union was able to sustain its members for upwards of three months.<sup>21</sup> A major reason for this was

18 Hempton, *Methodism*, p 215.

19 Hempton, *Methodism*, p 215.

20 See Scotland, *Methodism and Revolt*, p 83;

N. A. D. Scotland, *Gloucestershire Agricultural Trade Unionism 1872-1950*, CGCHE, Cheltenham 1991, p 35.

21 Scotland, *Methodism and Revolt*, p 80.

the loyalty which existed amongst the district officials who knew each other and preached and worked as brothers on the same Methodist circuits. During the struggle, Joseph Arch, the union's national leader, and other local delegates held religious services with hymns and prayers and then exhorted the men in the name of Christ to remain firm in their resolve. Collections were taken in support of the lockout funds and the men and their families. Dr Howard Newby commented on the immense difficulty of holding a strike solid for any length of time. In his view the achievement of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union was remarkable on any showing.<sup>22</sup>

The variety of ways in which working class movements utilised the different aspects of Methodist structure and organisation are numerous. The following instances are also illustrative of the wide ranging nature of Methodist influence. In the run up to the passage of the Great Reform Bill of 1832 many local pressure and support groups were organised. One of the most prominent of these was the Birmingham Political Union which was inspired by the leadership of Thomas Attwood, a man of fervent Christian convictions. According to his nineteenth century biographer, Attwood endowed the Political Union with 'his own love for peace, law, order, loyalty and union' and conducted it 'in the manner of a Methodist outdoor meeting'.<sup>23</sup> A little later when Richard Cobden formed the Anti-Corn League he expressed his belief that mass movements such as the Reform Bill 'had copied intentionally or unintentionally the Wesleyan model'. Cobden himself stated that he consciously followed Methodist precedent when he organised the League.<sup>24</sup> Reflecting on how the ordinary people might be mobilised against the Corn Laws, Cobden declared:

I think the scattered elements may yet be rallied round the question of Corn Laws. It appears to me that a moral and even a religious spirit may be infused into that topic, and if agitated in the same manner that the question of slavery had been, it will be irresistible.<sup>25</sup>

The lecturers of the League, the chief agitators against the Corn Laws, went out 'like Methodist preachers on the circuit, from town to town, to anathematise the wicked landlords'.<sup>26</sup>

The most frequently adapted Methodist institution was the Camp meeting. This was basically a form of frontier revivalism which was very popular at the beginning of the century in the American colonies. Large numbers of people from a wide area were brought together to take part in singing and other religious exercises and to hear good preaching. Hugh Bourne, one of the founders of Primitive Methodism, read accounts of American Camp Meetings in the religious press and organised the first Camp Meeting at Mow Cop near Stoke-on-Trent in 1807. From that time forward Camp Meetings became a growing feature of Primitive Methodism.

22 H. Newby, *The Deferential Worker*, Allen Lane, London 1977, ch. 3.

23 C. M. Wakefield, *Life of Thomas Attwood*, Harrison & Sons, London 1885, p 122.

24 R. Cowherd, *The Politics of English Dissent*, Epworth, London 1959, p 132.

25 Cowherd, *English Dissent*, p 132.

26 Cowherd, *English Dissent*, p 132.

Many Union leaders, particularly those who were Primitive Methodists and recognised their value, arranged camp meetings. These occasions were frequently religious in tone with music, preaching and singing. For example in June 1867, the Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire Miners Association' leaders organised a camp-meeting in a field close to Cottmanhay chapel, near Ilkeston. In the afternoon and evening Jonas Hooper of Church Gresley, William Brown and Joseph Severn of Ilkeston delivered 'stirring addresses' to the large congregations. Collections were taken for the children of locked-out miners.<sup>27</sup> Similarly the *English Labourers' Chronicle* reported a National Agricultural Labourers Union camp meeting held at Ludford on Sunday 11th August 1878:

The weather being fine, a large company came together in the afternoon: singing commenced in the streets. The meeting was conducted by Mr W. Everett. Addresses were given by... J. Dowse of Middle Rasen, and J. Oliver an aged man of Ludford. There was a collection for local expenses, then singing and prayer closed the service. The evening service was not so largely attended.<sup>28</sup>

Surveys of the *English Labourers' Chronicle*, the agricultural trade union newspaper, reveal that many union districts organised one and sometimes two camp meetings a year.

## Methodism and socialism

Towards the end of the nineteenth century socialist ideas and doctrine became more prominent and men and women from among the working classes began to embrace socialist thinking. Before 1900 the majority of labour leaders were clearly Liberal in their political convictions but by the turn of the century matters had begun to alter. In the first half of the nineteenth century Wesleyan Methodism under Bunting was both conservative and reactionary. However in the later Victorian years all this began to change particularly through the influence of the Wesleyan Reformers and of Hugh Price Hughes (1847-1902). Hughes began to be more socially active as a result of his being superintendent of the Oxford circuit from 1881-1884 where he had considerable contact with working class men and women. In 1889 he was placed in charge of the Wesleyan Methodist West London Mission. Here he became a prominent preacher and advocate of socialist ideas. 'The great need of our time is for Christian Socialism', he said in 1884. The following year he founded *The Methodist Times* to propagate his own particular brand of socialism in the face of the more reactionary and conservative official publications such as the *Methodist Recorder*, *The Watchman* and *Wesleyan Advertiser*. Hughes advocated 'Collectivist Solutions' to the evils of poverty. 'The statute book', he declared, 'is the national conscience'. Moral persuasion in his view was not enough to achieve reform. He asserted that the force of law and the power of the state was essential.<sup>29</sup> Hughes set in motion what became dubbed as the 'Forward Movement' which awakened Methodists of all sections to social and political action.

27 A. R. Griffin, 'Methodism and Trade Unionism in the Nottinghamshire-Derbyshire Coalfield, 1844-90, *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, 99 (1968), pp 2-9.

28 *English Labourers' Chronicle*, 24 August 1878.

29 H. Hughes, *Social Christianity*, p 141, cited by E. R. Norman, *The Victorian Christian Socialists*, CUP, Cambridge 1987, p 141.

Among Hughes' most ardent allies was Samuel Keeble (1853-1946). Like Hughes, Keeble unweariedly insisted that socialism must be rooted in Christianity. Keeble delivered forthright attacks on the building of 'wretched back to backs' in Leeds, was part of a deputation which waited on Lord Salisbury in support of an eight hour day, and a strong defender of the dock workers' strike. In the celebrated 'Taff Vale' strike and subsequent prosecution of the Amalgamated Union of Railway Servants, Keeble was bitterly resentful since he realised that the court's decision could cripple the Trade Unions and undo all the positive results effected by the Acts of 1871 and 1875. He declared that now 'Unions are actionable and strikes illegal in practice, because at any time it might mean the confiscation by the Law Courts of all their funds. There are only two alternatives. The law must be altered or compulsory arbitration must be enacted.'<sup>30</sup>

This changing climate of opinion began to take hold not only of Wesleyan preachers such as the Rev. W. Barnes of Nelson who expounded in his Methodist chapel upon the theme of 'what Socialism can do for the people'<sup>31</sup> but also on Methodists who stood for Parliament. By the close of the first decade of the twentieth century there were a small number of Labour members in the House of Commons who were also Methodists.

### Methodism and parliamentary reform

In considering the more specific impact of Methodism on the individual arms of the English Labour Movement an obvious starting point is in the matter of Parliamentary campaigns for better conditions of work and a widening of the franchise. Many Methodist ministers were observed to be advocates of the 1832 Reform Bill. Some of them were even reported to be visiting their members with copies of Tom Paine's *Rights of Man* in their pockets. The *Methodist Magazine* advocated the Bill urging that 'it affords an opportunity for pious people to express themselves.'<sup>32</sup> Methodist support of the movement for factory reform was focused in the campaigning of the Revd Joseph Rayner Stephens (1805-1879). According to the *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 'A great northern campaign started with a rally of 1,000 Ashton supporters on 19 January, addressed with fervid eloquence by Stephens.'<sup>33</sup> He went on to give further speeches in Manchester and Bury in which he urged workers 'to resist by all lawful means ... any attempt .... to repeal the eight hour clause of Lord Althorp's Factory Act'.<sup>34</sup> In his campaigning Stephens regularly appeared with Richard Oastler who was brought up as a Methodist but later became a staunch Anglican. Both men found the motivation for their political activism in the Bible and their religious beliefs and both rejected outright the notion that religion had nothing to do with politics. Speaking at a torch-lit rally in Huddersfield in the autumn of 1836 Stephens declared that the factory system was

30 M. Edwards, *S. E. Keeble Pioneer and Prophet*, Epworth Press, London 1949, p 58.

31 See Ainsworth, 'Religion in the Working Class Community', p 26, citing P. Firth, *Socialism and the Origins of the Labour Party in Nelson and District 1890-1906*, unpublished MA Thesis, University of Manchester, 1975.

32 *Methodist Magazine*, 3rd series, xi, p 532 cited by Cowherd, *English Dissent*, p 83.

33 *Manchester and Salford Advertiser* cited by J. T. Ward, *Revolutionary Tory: The Life of Joseph Rayner Stephens of Ashton-under-Lyme 1805-1879* (undated), p 95.

34 Ward, *Revolutionary Tory*, p 95.

'bloody and murderous ... and if it could not be mended, it should be ended, for God had spoken its doom'. He went on to pledge himself for the eight hour day. In the months that followed he preached widely throughout the north against the mills which had been built with 'gold coined out of the blood and bones of the operatives'.<sup>35</sup>

## Methodism and Trade Unions

Another aspect of the English Labour Movement was the founding and development of Trade Unions. For the reasons already stated, Methodists and particularly Primitive Methodists, were able to provide many leaders of the Trade Unions. Some obvious examples include the first Agricultural Worker's Union founded at Tolpuddle in 1834 which proved abortive. Six of the seven founder members, 'the Tolpuddle Martyrs', who were convicted and sentenced to transportation for life, were Wesleyan Methodists. In the 1830s the Primitive Methodists gave many significant leaders to the mineworkers' unions. Tommy Hepburn (1795-1864), a Primitive Methodist local preacher, was the leader of the first such combination founded in Durham in 1832. The first president of the Yorkshire Mineworkers' Federation, Ned Cowey (1839-1903), was a Primitive Methodist local preacher with a commanding presence. A. R. Griffin in his study has shown that a high percentage of Methodists held leadership positions in the Unions of Nottinghamshire-Derbyshire Coalfield in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> Joseph Arch (1828-1919), the founder and first president of the *National Agricultural Labourers' Union* was a Primitive Methodist local preacher of independent means who came from the village of Barford in Warwickshire. At the Union's inaugural meeting at Leamington in 29 March 1872 there were delegates from some twenty-six counties. The conference was markedly religious in character with speaker after speaker using phrases redolent of the Methodist chapels: 'Gentlemen and b'lv'd Chrissen friends [*sic*], 'This be a blessed day,' 'This 'ere Union be the Moses to lead us poor men out o' Egypt.' Such a Christian atmosphere as this led the correspondent of the *Congregationalist* to the discovery that 'three fourths of the delegates were members of the Christian churches and half of them local preachers'.<sup>37</sup>

This catalogue could readily be extended but as it stands, it is more than sufficient to make the point that Methodism played a significant role in providing leadership for the trade unions. Professor Hugh McLeod wrote of the Methodist working men and women: 'When they got together in the pub, miners might have a laugh at the expense of their more straight-laced Methodist colleague, but when it came to choosing someone who could speak out on their behalf in a dispute, it was very often the Methodists who got their vote'.<sup>38</sup> It was for these sorts of reasons that Eric Hobsbawm wrote of Primitive Methodists that '... it is not too much to think of them as primarily a sect of trade union cadres'.<sup>39</sup>

35 Ward, *Revolutionary Tory*, p 100.

36 See Griffin, 'Methodism and Trades Unionism', pp 2-9.

37 Anon., 'Labourers in Council', *The Congregationalist*, 1972, p 421.

38 McLeod, H., *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian England*, Headstart History, Gwynedd, 1993, p 42

39 *Primitive Rebels*, p 138.

## Methodism and Co-operation

The links between Methodism and the Co-operative Movement are a little more tenuous than in some other aspects of the nineteenth-century Labour Movement. Nevertheless they are there. Stephen Mayor observed that several of the Rochdale Pioneers who formed the first Co-operative Wholesale Stores at Toad Lane in 1844 were members of the Rochdale Methodist Unitarian Movement.<sup>40</sup> Clover Street Methodist Unitarian chapel was known as the 'Co-operative chapel', and owed its origins to a secession led by Joseph Cooke a Wesleyan circuit minister. The Methodist Unitarians, as Stuart Mews observed, retained many of the characteristics of working class sectarian Methodism. They prayed earnestly and enjoyed vigorous emotional worship and extempore praying.<sup>41</sup> Mews also noted that the Lancashire Methodist Unitarian chapels taught writing on the Sabbath and 'helped to produce and attracted, men of independent and radical views.'<sup>42</sup> Methodists who took an active role in the organising and running of CWS are not difficult to find. For example, Frederick Bugg of Ipswich who was an active member of the Liberal Party and a local preacher for the Primitive Methodists was the inspiration behind the formation of a Co-operative store in the parish of Walton on the outskirts of Felixstowe.<sup>43</sup> A number of Methodist agricultural trade unionists organised Co-operative stores at Docketing in Norfolk and at Spalding, Market Rasen, Ludford, Nettleton, Binbrook and Howsham in Lincolnshire.<sup>44</sup>

## Dénouement

It is the case that both the Established Church and the older dissenting bodies played active roles in the origin and development of the Labour Movement. Inevitably, however, their roles were bound to be less than that of Methodism. Most obviously the Church of England was identified with the middle and upper middle-class interests and even the Congregationalist and the Baptist chapels were often crowded with serried ranks of lower middle-class trades people, shopkeepers and semi-skilled artisans. In contrast to this, it was the Methodist dissenters of all groups who were most fully represented among the labouring masses. Indeed A. D. Gilbert observed that 'Primitive Methodism had almost twice the average Evangelical Nonconformist representation among the unskilled'.<sup>45</sup> E. R. Wickham in his study noted that 'Primitive Methodism in Sheffield embraced more of the artisan class than any other church in the second half of the nineteenth century.'<sup>46</sup> But even leaving these basic facts to one side, it is still hard to escape the conclusion that of all the Christian churches it was the Methodists who played the most significant rôle in the nineteenth century Labour Movement.

40 S. Mayor, *The Churches and the Labour Movement*, Independent Press, London 1967, p 154.

41 S. Mews, 'Reason and Emotion in Working Class Religion 1794-1824' *Studies in Church History*, vol. 9 *Schism, Heresy and Religious Protest*, ed. D. Baker, CUP, Cambridge 1972, p 376.

42 Mews, 'Reason and Emotion', p 376.

43 See *Suffolk Chronicle*, 24 May, 1884.

44 See Scotland, *Methodism and Revolt*, ch. 11, and P. McInnes, *History of Cooperation in Lincoln 1861-1911*, Co-operative Wholesale Society, Manchester 1911, p 78.

45 Gilbert, *Religion and Society*, p 650.

46 E. R. Wickham, *Church and People in an Industrial City*, Lutterworth Press, London 1969, pp 131-135.

Methodism taught the labouring classes a form of protest. Just the very fact of establishing a Methodist society in a Church of England parish, and particularly so in the countryside, often marked the beginning of the end of the power of the local parson and the farmers or mill owners. Methodism also helped to produce a more articulate labourer who could read and write and speak clearly in a public meeting. Methodism widened the horizons of the poor beyond the compass of their immediate locality and it possessed their thinking and consciousness with a concept of a wider brotherhood. Methodist preachers certainly imbued the labouring classes with a heightened social awareness and a strong sense of justice. Their preaching also frequently addressed the themes of brotherhood, the priesthood of all believers and social justice. The Methodist stress on spiritual equality provided a basis and the seed for the search for a greater social equality. This paper has shown the ways in which all of these themes fed into the consciousness and action of the various prongs of the Labour Movement.

Above all, it is clear that Methodism made two very prominent and overt contributions. These were in the provision of leadership and in offering models of organisation. Many prominent Chartist, Trade Union and other labour leaders were clearly inspired, motivated and sustained by their Methodist faith. In many of the nineteenth century trade unions and working class movements there are clear reflections of the Methodist three tiered structure of national conference, district and local society. Many radical groups used chapels as the venue for their meetings which were often after the style of a Methodist band meeting or fellowship gatherings. More obviously, the Chartists and the Trade Unions made frequent use of the Methodist style camp meeting, class meeting and even, on occasion, the Methodist Love Feast. It seems therefore reasonable to conclude that the kind of Christianity which counted for most in the history of the Labour Movement was that which found its expression in the several branches of Methodism.

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