

Labour movement historiography

John Saville

The study of working class history is still far from being accepted as an essential and necessary part of the syllabus in History faculties in this country. Partly this is due to the excessive specialisation and compartmentalism of historical studies, partly because relatively little writing stands up to accepted standards of criticism, but largely, it may be suggested, because modern British history is taught in terms that fail to recognise some of the crucial questions of historical analysis. So the academic journals carry little material and, except in one or two centres, graduate research workers tend to ignore the themes of working class history and their relation to the development of society. Even where a tradition of study and research has been developed in the past, the trend in postgraduate studies during the past decade has been away from the subject. In some respects this is a not unfamiliar story in other branches of history, for, given the conservatism of history faculties, relatively new developments have had considerable difficulty in becoming accepted into the curricula. Thus, while the study of economic history has made great strides during the past forty years or so, and has increasingly affected the teaching and writing of political history, it is still far from being integrated with constitutional or diplomatic history, to give the two most obvious examples. It must be admitted that in the matter of international affairs in particular, this is partly the fault of the economic historians themselves, since there have been few attempts, for the modern period, to analyse the economic relationships between nation states, and the Marxists, whom one would expect to recognise the significance of imperialism in the twentieth century, have left the subject more or less as Lenin outlined it in 1916.

the landlords rather than the capitalists were regarded as the main enemy by the working class is one of the fascinating paradoxes of modern British history. For Ernest Jones in 1867 the central evil was "a constant labour surplus fed by a constantly growing monopoly of the land". "The workers," declared the man who was to

become the secretary of the Land and Labour League of the early 1870s "are nothing but white wage slaves to the same classes who have always been licensed by the land robbers to rob and plunder their forefathers from the time of the Norman Conquest." When the Aberdeen Trades Council was drafting a letter which set out their analysis of the trade depression in the middle of the 1880s, they wrote: "The greatest evils with which we have to contend arise from or are exaggerated by the action of our land laws as at present framed, throwing as they do the burden of taxation on industry generally and most seriously on the operative classes"; and although the Scottish workers were concerned in the 1880s with the special problem of the eviction of the crofters from the Highlands and the Islands, these ideas were just as acceptable to the workers below the Border. To eliminate these "evils" land nationalisation was advocated by the left wing of the workers and even by small groups among the middle-class Radicals. But most of the workers and the majority of the middle class stopped far short of nationalisation and concentrated upon a drastic reform of the Land Laws as the first and essential step towards breaking the monopoly exercised by the landed aristocracy. The demand for "Free Trade in Land" had been central to the economic demands of the bourgeoisie since the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. Liberals of all shades of opinion, from Cobden to John Stuart Mill, were united upon a recognition of the problem. Even the *Economist*, always very conservative in its liberalism, was agreed upon the necessity of the reform of the land laws, because thereby the efficiency of agriculture would be promoted. The publication of the so called "New Domesday Book" in the middle 1870s confirmed the case against the aristocracy's land monopoly with official statistics collected by a committee of the House of Lords. The historical origins of landed monopoly began increasingly to be studied. Landed monopoly was linked with the absence of a peasantry on the Continental model, and under further impact of agricultural crisis, the historical processes whereby the

labourer became "divorced from the land" (a phrase that Cobden was using in the 1840s) were steadily revealed. Related to these enquiries and as an essential part of the analysis went a new interest by English Liberals in the origins of modern capitalism—an interest heralded by the publication of Toynbee's Lectures on The Industrial Revolution in 1884. The writing within this period includes the work of Thorold Rogers and J. R. Green and it closes with the classic volume of Tawney (*The Agrarian Problem in the 16th Century*) and the series of books by the Hammonds that are concerned with the problems of the industrial revolution. Since most of the historians working in this field, including those already mentioned, were liberals, radicals or socialists the results of their researches provided an impressive indictment of the economic and social consequences of modern capitalism (which an influential group among academic historians, during the last twenty years or so, have been doing their best to deny). But while there were a number of weaknesses, and especially theoretical weakness, in the writings of this great Radical tradition above all it restored the common people to history.

The early Socialists

An inevitable byproduct of this wide-ranging enquiry into economic and social history was the beginnings of research into the origins and social and political development of the wage-earning class. Such an interest was naturally fostered by the early Socialists. The great landmark—essentially a Radical one—was the publication of the Webb's *History of Trade Unionism* in 1894. Gammage's *History of the Chartist Movement* was re-issued in the same year and among the spate of books published in the next two decades was the English edition of Manger's *The Right to the Whole Produce of Labour*, important for the introduction by Foxwell, an essay that made known the rich native tradition or pre-Marxist socialism in this country; the translation of Beer's *History of Socialism* and the half-dozen histories of Chartism that are still the main sources of information today.

Among those who passed their formative years within the influence of this tradition were G. D. H. Cole, Harold Laski (who moved very close to the Marxist position in the 1930s) and H. L. Beales; and these three were the most important influences upon the writing and research in the field of working-class history in the inter-war years. G. D. H. Cole has written prodigiously on all aspects and periods of the Labour movement, and Laski and H. L. Beales were the main sources of inspiration within the large graduate body of the London School of Economics. While however, the political influence exercised by these three, and those associated with them, has been immense, it is important to recognise that the left socialist tradition which they represented has not been a growing movement among intellectuals. At Oxford in the 1920s many of the young socialists, like Gaitskell, Jay and Durbin, while greatly influenced by Cole, were politically much to the right of him; and although many among the graduate and undergraduate generations in the 1930s turned to Marxism, large numbers turned away again during the next decade when they became aware of the implications of Stalinism. But wherever intellectuals have finally ended, in political terms it has not in general meant an accession of strength to the left position of which Cole today is the outstanding representative.

One consequence is that there has been no sustained work in the subject apart from the writings of Cole himself. The Marxists have begun to contribute something

during the last two decades but their numbers are small. Although we know today very much more than ever before about the sequence of events in the history of the Labour movement, there are still many gaps in what may be called the straight history and much uncertainty and confusion concerning its interpretation. There is still no modern writing to supersede the pioneering work by Brown on *The French Revolution in English History*, now half a century old. We continue to lack a major biography of any of the front rank Chartist leaders—Louvett, O'Connor, O'Brien, Harney or Jones—although the long-awaited publication of Schoven's volume on Harney will be a major step forward and the superb biography of Oastler by Driver must not be omitted. For the main details of the Chartist movement we continue to rely either on Gammage, whose *History* has been treated with much less caution than it deserves, or on the half-dozen secondary authorities published before 1920. In the next generation of Labour leaders after Chartism, there are William Allan, William Newton, George Odger, Robert Applegarth and George Potter still without their modern biographers. The history of the First International is now being written but no one has yet produced a study of the political relations between Marx and Engels and the British Labour movement that will illuminate so much of working-class history from 1848 to nearly the end of the century. As a stop gap we have been offered the collected writings of Marx and Engels on England, thrown together (there are no other words for the lack of proper editing) by the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow. It is a useful volume but much less useful than it ought to have been. For the period after 1880 we have among recent works the first-rate study by E. P. Thompson on William Morris—the most important piece of writing since the war in this field—and the volume by Henry Pelling on the 1890s. But we continue to lack a proper account of Hyndman and the SDF without which a good deal of the story of the early socialist movement will continue to be misunderstood, and the same can be said of our failure to produce a detailed history of the origins and development of the ILP or a considered assessment of the role of the Fabians in the general movement.

The Labour Party

There are possibly even more gaps in our knowledge of the Labour movement in the inter-war years, and what little specialist writing has been published is mostly the work of American scholars. Since in this period the Labour Party emerged as the main opposition party, what we now want, *inter alia*, is an analytical study of the relationship of the various power groups inside the Party at different periods of time; an account of the changes in political ideas among both the leadership and the rank and file; and an appreciation of the increase of the middle class elements in the highest councils of the Party. Among such specialist studies there is further need for an appraisal of the impact of foreign and colonial affairs upon the Labour Party membership at all levels, along the lines that Graubard has recently published in his book *British Labour and the Russian Revolution* (1956). The McDonald papers are not yet available for the student and most of the other Labour and trade union leaders of this period are still lacking their full-length biographies. Outside the Labour Party, the greatest gaps are the absence of documentary histories of both the I.L.P. (which was affiliated to the Labour Party until 1932) and the Communist Party (founded in 1920).

Trade Union history is similarly neglected and there is just as much to be done. An excellent example of what can be done is provided by Mr. J.C. D. Buckley's *Trade*

Unionism in Aberdeen, 1878-1900, published in 1955. It is one of the major weaknesses of working-class history that the story has been told too much from what may be called the national angle and thereby has missed the significance—in some movements such as Chartism or the early development of ILP, the crucial significance—of local developments. Mr. Buckley's essay is a most excellent corrective to those histories written too frequently from the pages of national journals and is a model for all those who follow him. He brings out most clearly the essential importance of the Trades Councils in the organization of the unskilled in the 1880s. In Aberdeen, where the Trades Councils had been established in 1868, the skilled workers, from the middle of the 1880s, began to undertake the organization of their unskilled brethren—before, that is to say, the great London explosions of the last years of the decade. Similarly, Mr. Buckley tells the story of the central part which the Trades Councils played in Aberdeen in the development of independent Labour representation in politics. Aberdeen for long remained a centre of militant politics, and this story of its beginnings is an excellent illustration, of which there are so many in Britain, of the long-term influence in a particular area of a relatively small number of devoted socialists.

Standards of criticism

But there is much more to the problem of working class history than a recital of the obvious gaps in the story. One of the strongest objections that academic historians develop against the inclusion of this branch of study in the general history syllabus is that the standards of criticism are insufficiently developed, and that in particular much of working class history that has been published is little more than a literary exercise. The criticism is exaggerated but not wholly unfounded; and the absence of a scholarly journal concerned with social history is to be deplored. On the matter of critical standards, it is somewhat extraordinary for example how many histories of Chartism have relied uncritically upon Gammage's partisan, biased and inaccurate account of the movement which he published in 1854, when still hot from his participation in its internal quarrels and feuds. Gammage remains useful, not least for the sense of participation and for his general liveliness, but neither his statements nor his interpretation can be accepted without a critical examination of his sources. A second example in this connection is the little book of reminiscences that Bruce Glasier published towards the end of his life (*William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement*). More than anyone else, Glasier was the purveyor of the myth that Morris, far from being a Marxist and a revolutionary, was the kind of person whom right wing Labour leaders have been happy to claim as their own. Fortunately, we have had this particular piece of mythology well and truly dissected. E. P. Thompson, in his work on Morris (Appendix IV) has shown precisely and thoroughly how Glasier falsified the record. When one reflects upon the spread of this idea of Morris, as a romantic version of any run of the mill reformist, and one that gained so much currency within the Labour movement here as well as abroad, it is the strength of the tradition that is so staggering. The point that is being made here is a general one. Much of working class history has to be put together from memoirs and contemporary accounts, and both are tricky sources that have to be handled carefully. It is not seldom that leaders of the labour movement become increasingly conservative as the years go by; and the pattern of late 19th century biography is more often than not a story of 'From Slum Cellar to Whitehall', with the world being looked at with vastly different eyes from those of a half century

before. Tom Mann is very much an exception to the general run. Nowadays, this particular problem is changing with the increasing middle class composition of Labour politicians; and many start as liberal as they end. But whatever the social origins of the working class leadership, there is always the tendency to rewrite one's memoirs backwards, and students of the history of the Labour movement have a special problem of interpretation and verification.

The problem of interpretation is indeed central, and it is here that the radical socialist tradition shows some crucial weaknesses. From the standpoint of a Marxist, these weaknesses may be summed up as: (1) a failure to recognize the pivotal factor of the class struggle in historical development; (2) the assumption that the state and the state apparatus occupy an uncommitted position in society; (3) an almost total neglect of the imperialist basis of the British economy in the last century and a half and a marked underestimation of the consequences of colonial exploitation for the economic and political development of the British people.

Most accounts of the 1890s—an important decade when the decisive steps were taken towards independent Labour representation—afford a direct example of the way in which the fact of class struggle is greatly minimised. Both G. D. H. Cole (*A Short History of the British Working Class Movement*) and Henry Pelling (*The Origins of the Labour Party*) lay quite insufficient emphasis upon the growing bitterness of the propertied classes against the trade unions and the young socialist movement. The upsurge of 1889 and the years which immediately followed was met by an organised counterattack from the employers which was supported both by the State (in strike breaking) and also by the Courts (in hostile anti-union judgments) in the second half of the decade. The smashing of the dockers organisations in Hull in 1893—chosen for the purpose because it was the best organised port—and the heavy defeats of the miners and engineers were followed by reactionary legal decisions culminating in the Taff Vale judgment of 1901. This decade is quite different in its temper from the one that ended with the great strike of 1889. The stage was now being set for the bitter conflicts of the next decade and a half, and the formation of powerful employers associations, the encouragement of union smashing from the American example, the acceptance of the "Free Labour" racket—all are evidence of a new militancy from the side of business. However reluctant many of the conservative skilled unions were in moving along the road towards a Labour Party, the exercise of the coercive and legal power of the state in the interests of property compelled them to recognise, and act upon, historical necessity. The half million odd votes cast for the Railway Servants resolution at the 1899 T.U.C. Congress (for the convening of a Conference to discuss increased Labour representation in Parliament) were the product of this recognition; and the establishment of the Labour Representation Committee was its immediate result.

The chartist masses

One of the byproducts of an approach that tends to play down the class struggle is a failure to understand how a mass movement of protest arises, how the development of class consciousness takes place, and how enthusiasm and idealism are continuously generated. Such, I believe, is why the Chartist movement, and O'Connor's role in the movement, have been so much misunderstood. Chartism is usually interpreted in most texts in critical terms; even Cole and Postgate's *The Common People* describe it as "incoherent and unaware of its objects," and almost all unite in damning without qualification the man who was its

leader longer than anyone else. It is indeed curious that the greatest mass movement the British working class has yet produced should have had a man at its head who was, in the words of Hovell, "conceited even to megalomania, ambitious, energetic, to a certain degree disinterested and sincere, an agitator and demagogue to his fingers". There is no doubt that O'Connor was guilty of many of the faults that later historians have been not unwilling to enlarge upon; but he was much more than a man full of his own importance whose political horizons were undoubtedly limited. No doubt to decry O'Connor means also to damn the masses who followed him, and if this was not the intention it has certainly been the result of most writing on this period. The re-assessment of O'Connor which is now due should begin with the question that Ernest Jones asked: ". . . but who has done so much in creating and organising the democratic mind?" It was indeed the emergence of a working-class political consciousness that was the main product of these stormy years—and O'Connor, a magnificent speaker and considerable journalist, more than any one else gave voice to the inarticulate desires and hopes of the Chartist masses.

It is difficult for those who do not share the passion for The Good Old Cause that is the essential ingredient of our socialist movement to appreciate the role of a working-class leader who inspires his hearers with a hatred of the system and thereby steels their endeavour to fight for a new society. Conservatives and Liberals should recognise the handicaps under which they work when they attempt to interpret the development of working-class ideas and their movements that results, for example, in **the** superbly silly comment in F. L. Woodward in his *Age of Reform* (a standard text for the school sixth form) that the Chartist leaders "had neither the leisure nor the education to develop a political technique and a convincing background of theory. Their political philosophy, such as it was, came mainly from their reading of the Bible . . ." If only O'Connor and Harney had been put to the treadmill of Haileybury! But socialists who write working-class history have no excuse for Mr. Woodward's approach and it is time that O'Connor, with all his faults and with a proper recognition of his strength, was given careful analysis.

The constitution betrayed

This lack of appreciation of the central place of the class struggle in historical development is responsible not only for a lopsided interpretation of which the attitude towards O'Connor is one of many examples, but it also inhibits a number of questions being asked of historical data. And this is perhaps of greater moment than misinterpretation, because given that facts are not born free and equal, misrepresentation of a particular individual or of a period at least means that the problem is under discussion, and at some point it can be expected that corrections will be applied. But where questions are not discussed at all in the texts, a considerable pioneering effort is required in order to prove their existence, and such is rarely forthcoming. An example of what I have in mind is the more precise definition and delineation of the general conditions of working-class life in 19th century out of which the demand for reform and change and social and political organisations arose and developed. We have nothing for the mid-19th century comparable with Duveau's book for France, *La Vie Ouvrière Sous le Second Empire*, and until we have adequately documented studies of the extent of truck in wages and earnings, the adulteration of foodstuffs, the degree of unemployment and underemployment in the

small master economy, and overcrowding and housing conditions, we shall in no way plumb the depths of degradation within which the majority of the working people lived and worked. We need a much closer approximation of economic and social conditions and political movements, and fitting the curve of cyclical fluctuations to the rise and fall of working class organisations is only the beginning of the analysis. Especially do we require studies of the labour market—by which is meant the conditions under which the proletariat offer their labour power at any particular period. We have here a much neglected subject which must include both a study of the techniques of factory discipline and the development of incentives within and without the factory, as well as the political and legal framework within which the labourers are bargaining. For the 19th century we can speak of the historical process whereby labour was moulded into an effective factor of production for the new industrial society; and the failure to analyse these processes is a major gap in our historical studies.

A brilliant example of the kind of analysis that is required of the law and legal decisions as they affected conditions of working-class life is given in Daphne Simon's essay on the Master and Servant Laws, published in 1954 (*Democracy and the Labour Movement*, ed. Saville). It is indeed a model of historical writing and it is to be hoped that it will stimulate many others to follow in this same field of study.

Labour conditions

This, relationship between the legal structure and political and social conditions was one to which the late Harold Laski especially drew attention; and his own studies are still models of their kind. His well known essay on the 'Judicial Review of Social Policy' (*Studies in Law and Politics*, 1932) has unfortunately had few successors. He once described Britain of the first half of the 19th century as a "police state". It was, that is, a society in which the main principles of political democracy—among them equality before the law, universal suffrage and freedom of speech and association—did not apply to the labouring masses; and the impact of this police state upon the lives of the working people has been largely neglected. It is for instance impossible to understand the decline of Chartism in 1848 without the knowledge that from the time of the Kennington Common meeting on April 10th the Government were using *agents-provocateurs* on a considerable scale, and that almost without exception, the witnesses in the mass trials of Chartists that took place in the second half of the year were police spies. The effectiveness of the prosecutions case was, however, in no way impaired, and the judges had no hesitation in imposing heavy sentences of imprisonment and in some cases of transportation. There were many other reasons responsible for decline, but the fantastic mythology that has grown up around the working-class movement in this year of revolutions—that Chartism collapsed amid the gales of laughter that swept the country when it was discovered that some signatures to the third Petition were fictitious, including such excruciatingly funny names (to *Punch* readers anyway) as 'Flatnose,' 'Pugnose' and 'No Cheese,' has no basis in fact. Against such interpretations we may quote Macaulay's comment on another matter: "Yet these stories are now altogether exploded. They have been abandoned by statesmen to aldermen, by aldermen to clergyman, by clergymen to old women and by old women . . ." to most of the writers on Chartism for the last hundred years.

There is a point that needs to be made. It is not always easy to arrive at an accurate assessment of what

the politicians are doing at the time when events are taking place, or to be precise, historically speaking, concerning the direction of contemporary movements. We are, for example only just beginning to discover from the Herbert Gladstone papers in the British Museum the nature of the electoral arrangements between the Liberal Party and the Labour Representation Committee prior to the election of 1906. The details of the arrangements, and the comments of those who negotiated the agreement throw much light upon the subsequent history of the parliamentary Labour Party in the years before 1914; and helps to explain why the ruling groups in this country, as Mr. Hobsbawm noted recently (*Past and Present*, April 1957) have never been seriously worried by the Labour Party as a threat to their position.

The study of working-class history is a necessary corrective to present doubt and one of the guides to future action. We do not study working-class history only to remind our-

selves of the betrayals and failures of the past. More important is the appreciation of the ways in which the mass of the people have developed their organisation and a minority has come to socialist consciousness. There are many strands of thought and action which have gone to the making of the modern Labour movement and their analysis is not an academic matter to be left to the specialist historian. Rather must it be seen as an essential part of the thinking of all those who play a part in the movement today. In seeking to understand the dynamics of the British Labour movement we shall recreate within ourselves the traditions of those who, in the past, struggled and sacrificed for a better society. The history of the Labour movement is the story of the common people in their strivings against oppression and injustice: their achievements and their failures have become an inseparable part of our own lives. It is their vision and the proper understanding of their efforts that is our starting point today.