

The life of George Jacob Holyoake exemplifies the development of popular Liberalism. **Edward Royle** analyses his biography and impact.



GEORGE JACOB HOLYOAKE

AS A young artisan eager for education and self-improvement, Holyoake's personal journey took him through the radical protest movements of the 1830s and 1840s to a career in journalism and political agitation and a position of some importance on the fringes of the Gladstonian Liberal Party. He is significant today as a pioneering agitator for those individual civil rights and liberal values which J. S. Mill championed in his essay *On Liberty* and which remain part of the liberal programme in our modern multi-cultural and multi-faith society; and he is best remembered as an advocate of cooperation and co-partnership as the middle way between capitalism and state socialism.

Born on 13 April 1817 in Birmingham where his father, George, was a whitesmith and his mother, Catherine, a horn-button maker, Holyoake was educated only at dame and Sunday schools. At the age of nine he began work with his father

at the Eagle Foundry where he was subsequently apprenticed as a whitesmith. Through the influence of fellow apprentices he was drawn into Birmingham politics in the early 1830s when Thomas Atwood organised the agitation for parliamentary reform through the Birmingham Political Union. Even more important was his association with the followers of the socialist, Robert Owen, led locally by William Pare. In 1836 Holyoake began attending classes at the mechanics' institute where he soon demonstrated his aptitude for mathematics and gained ambitions to become a teacher, but his association with the Owenites counted against further progress at the institute. In March 1839 he married Eleanor Williams (1819–1884), daughter of a small farmer, and in May 1840 his first child, Madeline, was born. These changed family circumstances and his growing aspiration to teach led him in October 1840 to apply to the Owenites to become their stationed lecturer in Worcester. The

George Jacob Holyoake (1817–1906)

following May he was promoted to social missionary in Sheffield.

At this stage Holyoake's opinions were still being formed. His association with the Birmingham Political Union, revived in 1837 as part of the early Chartist movement, marked him out as a radical and democrat. As a follower of Owen, he looked to the transformation of society by peaceful means into a cooperative commonwealth. In religious matters, early Unitarian influences at the mechanic's institute gave way to the deism of Robert Owen and this was probably Holyoake's position until an incident in 1842 pushed the young lecturer into declaring himself an atheist when he was imprisoned for six months in Gloucester gaol for blasphemy following a flippant comment about God at an Owenite lecture in Cheltenham. This punishment, coming in the midst of similar sentences for other Owenites and leading Chartists in 1842–43, brought Holyoake's name to the fore and gave him status as a martyr to free thought, making him a

national figure in popular radical circles. He now became what he was to be for the rest of his long life – a prolific writer, a perceptive journalist and a public lecturer, though his thin voice and slight stature scarcely fitted him for the latter role. His first taste of journalism had come before his imprisonment when he edited a short-lived weekly periodical, the *Oracle of Reason* (1841–43), whose first editor – fellow Owenite missionary, Charles Southwell – had been imprisoned for a year in 1841 for attacking the Bible. After his release from Gloucester gaol in 1843, Holyoake then edited the *Movement* (1843–45) followed by the *Reasoner*, which he began at the behest of the publisher, James Watson, in 1846 to sustain the causes of democracy, republicanism, Owenite socialism and free-thinking rationalism. The paper was published weekly until 1861 and its successors continued under various names until 1872. With the revival of Chartism in 1848, Holyoake also co-edited, with the republican poet and engraver, William James Linton, a short-lived weekly under the title, the *Cause of the People*.

In the chaos of recrimination which followed the failures of Owenism in 1846 and of Chartism in 1848, Holyoake emerged as one of several national figures with a claim to lead these movements. Through his publishing activities and lecture tours he bid to unite the scattered local remnants of latter-day Chartists and Owenites in a new organisation which he called Secularism. Though this embraced his support for democracy at home and republicanism abroad, its chief purpose was to campaign against all religious influences, in the law, politics and morality. Secularism was, above all, to be a movement to secure the civil rights of all, irrespective of the theological persuasion. This represented a shift away from the extremism of the earlier 1840s, to which he was always reluctant to admit, and grew out of his temperamental discomfort with the position into which he had been forced by circumstances in 1842. The move was also encouraged by the links he was forging with middle-class liberal intellectuals in the later 1840s, particularly

the South Place Chapel grouping around W. J. Fox and those who gravitated to the Muswell Hill home of W. H. Ashurst, Robert Owen's solicitor and friend of the Italian republican, Mazzini. In 1849 Holyoake's rising status among this radical intelligentsia of the metropolis was marked by an invitation to become a member of the Whittington Club, and his correspondents from the later 1840s include such leading liberals as George Dawson, George Henry Lewes, Harriet Martineau, John Stuart Mill, Francis William Newman and Peter Alfred Taylor as well as Ashurst himself. Holyoake was also, with some of these people, associated with the *Leader* newspaper, edited by Thornton Hunt, which advocated advanced liberal principles in political and social affairs.

This association with the liberal intelligentsia may have gratified Holyoake but his growing moderation caused increasing controversy with his former friends and allies. Chartists criticised his expediency in settling too readily for a step-by-step approach to democracy, and his insistence that Secularism meant concentrating on driving out religious influences in this world, not undermining belief in the existence of God, alienated those who believed that the latter was a necessary precondition of the former. Holyoake was not a charismatic public speaker and, when such a person appeared in the form of Charles Bradlaugh at the end of the 1850s, Holyoake found himself no longer recognised as the most important leader of what he always regarded as his own movement. His resentment at this never faded, but the time had come to move on, and he did so in two directions.

The first was in promoting specific agitations to secure what he regarded as the aims of true Secularism. Chief of these was freedom of belief, expression and publication. Many of his aspirations were summed up in Mill's essay *On Liberty* (1859) which – notably in Chapter 2 – drew upon Holyoake's own experiences of the dead hand of prejudiced public opinion in general and his campaigns against the judicial oath in particular. Holyoake was also

active in the campaign against the so-called Taxes on Knowledge which imposed financial constraints on a free press. In 1849 he had, with his brother Austin, commenced printing on his own behalf and in 1853 he took over James Watson's stock and began publishing in his own right. Gladstone's work as Chancellor of the Exchequer, accepting in 1853 a motion to reduce the newspaper stamp to zero, and his challenge to the House of Lords over the abolition of the paper duty in the 1861 budget were key moments in the transformation of the former Conservative and Peelite into 'the People's William'. At the same time, the struggle for Italian liberation and unification provided another reason for radicals like Holyoake to see Gladstone as their parliamentary leader. Since 1848 Holyoake had been increasingly involved in the European republican movement where moderates in England could support foreign extremists with a good conscience. He collected money for Mazzini, tested prototype bombs for Orsini, and was secretary to the committee which sent a legion out to Italy to fight with Garibaldi in 1860. By the early 1860s Holyoake's work for liberty both at home and abroad reflected those broader shifts in political structures which were leading to the formation of the Gladstonian Liberal Party.

Secondly, Holyoake developed through the Secularist movement his connections with local groups of former Chartists and Owenites to form links with the infant cooperative movement. In 1858 he published a history of the Rochdale Pioneers Equitable Society, founded in 1844, and in so doing fashioned their mythic role in the post-Owenite cooperative movement and also made his own reputation as a leading publicist for that movement. The book was to go through ten English editions and also appeared in four different French translations as well as ones in German, Italian and Hungarian. He also wrote histories of cooperation in Halifax (1867) and Leeds (1897) as well as several general histories of cooperation (1875–1906) and other propagandist works in the cause, including one intended for the American

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Further reading

Holyoake's correspondence of some four thousand letters is at the National Co-operative Archive, Holyoake House, Manchester, and an almost complete collection of his publications, diaries and other manuscripts are at the Bishopsgate Institute, London.

His own readable but unreliable memoirs are contained in *Sixty Years of an Agitator's Life*, 2 vols. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892) and *Bygones Worth Remembering*, 2 vols. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1905).

The most comprehensive but uncritical biography is Joseph McCabe, *Life and Letters of George Jacob Holyoake*, 2 vols. (London: Watts & Co., 1908). For a modern but briefer treatment, see Lee E. Grugel, *George Jacob Holyoake: A Study in the Evolution of a Victorian Radical* (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1976), and for aspects of his life see Barbara J. Blazsack, *George Jacob Holyoake (1817–1906) and the Development of the British Cooperative Movement* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellan Press, 1988) and Edward Royle, *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement, 1791–1866* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974).

The latter should be supplemented by two recent essays by the same author, 'The Cause of the People, the People's Charter Union and "Moral Force" Chartism in 1848' in J. Allen and O. R. Ashton (eds.), *Papers for the People. A Study of the Chartist Press* (London: Merlin Press, 2005); and 'Leadership and strategy in British radicalism after 1848' in Joanne Paisana (ed.), *Hélio Osvaldo Alves. O Guardador de Rios* (Braga: University of Minho, 2005), pp. 283–98.

market. Though the Rochdale store is usually identified with retail shopkeeping, it also had its educational and productive sides, and Holyoake was always as concerned with producers' cooperation and profit-sharing schemes as he was with grocery stores. Cooperation was still for him a grand scheme whereby the workers could achieve independence from their employers by their own concerted efforts. In this advocacy he was both influenced by and influenced John Stuart Mill whose *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) steered a similar path between capitalism and socialism. As state socialist ideas gained ground among radicals in the 1880s, Holyoake found an increasingly ready ear among Liberal politicians who saw him as a reassuring spokesman for the liberal working classes.

Holyoake lived until 1906, by which time he had outlived most of those who could challenge his uncertain memory of the events to which he had devoted his long public life, and his status owed much to his age. The second half of his life, from the 1860s to 1906, coincides almost exactly with the rise and fall of the Gladstonian Liberal Party. Holyoake was never central to this process, nor quite as important as he himself liked to believe, but he was closely associated with it and his experiences can act as a commentary upon it. He offered himself at the polls as a Liberal candidate in Tower Hamlets (1857), Birmingham (1868), and Leicester (1884), but withdrew on each occasion before the

vote; and in 1893 he was made an honorary member of the National Liberal Club.

However, the true extent of his involvement in the Liberal Party is to be found in his voluminous correspondence and his journalism: he can best be described as a lobbying correspondent and an important channel of communication between the party, individual MPs and the wider radical public. During 1861–63, for example, he worked closely with J. S. Trelawney over the latter's unsuccessful Secular Affirmations Bills, feeding him material for use in parliamentary debate. His technique was to circulate his publications widely in influential circles, ensuring that MPs were well briefed on controversial issues. His campaign (for once against J. S. Mill) in support of the secret ballot made a substantial contribution to that debate. He was always particularly active at the time of general elections, trying to suggest and persuade suitable candidates to stand as Liberals and to influence their views. He corresponded regularly not only with expected radicals like John Stuart Mill, James Stansfeld, Charles Dilke, Thomas Hughes, John Bright, Henry Fawcett and J. H. Thorold Rogers, but also with the moderate Whig, Lord Elcho, over parliamentary reform in 1866, and Walter Morrison of Malham Tarn, who was a supporter of cooperation but who joined the Liberal Unionists over Ireland in 1886. Holyoake worked particularly closely with Joseph Cowen,

proprietor of the *Newcastle Chronicle* and MP for Newcastle upon Tyne (1873–1886). In 1862 the two men orchestrated the publicity surrounding Gladstone's visit to Middlesbrough which is sometimes taken as the first occasion when Gladstone appreciated the extent of the popular support he enjoyed. Holyoake was London correspondent for Cowen's paper for many years and between 1874 and 1883 had lodgings in Newcastle Chambers off the Strand.

Holyoake moved to Brighton in 1885, the year following the death of his wife. The following year he married Jennie Pearson but his closest political aide remained his youngest daughter, Emilie, who became secretary of the Women's Trade Union and Provident League in 1889. He continued active to the end, publishing his ideas, making occasional speeches and writing letters. Some of the causes he took up were trivial and give the impression of an old man unable to break his lifetime's habit of lobbying and agitating, but his stream of letters to leading figures was generally received at least with politeness and often with expressions of gratitude and even enthusiasm. Across a wide range of issues he contributed to liberal public opinion: matters such as secular education, affirmations instead of oaths, emigration, cooperation and profit-sharing schemes, restrictions on Sunday leisure, the tax on railway travel, Irish policy, international peace, and the Boer War. On 14 January 1906 his last public act was to issue an appeal in *Reynolds's News*, urging support for the Liberals in the coming general election. He did not live to see that triumph, dying on 22 January. His ashes were buried in Highgate cemetery a week later and the memorial raised over the site was fittingly provided by the cooperative movement.

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