

A Working Class Radical

George Jacob Holyoake

by Lee E Grugel (Porcupine Press, Philadelphia, 1976)

Reviewed by Tony Little

Throughout the Victorian era, politics remained the province of the upper classes. Even in the final decade of the century, the last two premiers were aristocrats, Rosebery and Salisbury. And yet, after 1832, politics were open to the middle classes and, after the second reform act, to the 'better sort' of skilled working class.

As popularly taught, history shows an upsurge in agrarian and urban unrest forcing the Great Reform Act through parliament and repeated popular agitation failing to carry the Charter in 1848, after which the working men only reappear as bit players in the rise of the unions or the Labour party. This view ignores the undertow of continuous working class political action - frequently outside the aristocratic political parties but after the 1860s as part of the mainstream. Of course the policies of both Liberals and Tories responded to aristocratic class interests and to the pressures from educated, organised middle class pressure groups. But, increasingly, policies were designed to incorporate working men within the bounds of the constitution and to respond to their economic and social needs. Whether through conviction, conversion or fear, the political elite were forced to look beyond their own immediate interests to the wider nation. Working men were sufficiently organised to articulate their interests and increasingly to achieve their objectives as the century progressed. Holyoake's life illustrates this development and while the particular direction his career took was probably unique, its combination of esoteric idealism and practical propaganda is illustrative of a typical Victorian pattern.

Born in 1817, George Holyoake was the son of a father who earned his living as a Birmingham mechanic and a mother who combined the manufacture of buttons with the rearing of eleven children. Although he received some schooling, at the age of nine he began to go to work with his father. Up to the age of 22 he worked successfully as a craftsman but after work continued his education. At evening classes he was drawn into religious and political discussions giving him a rationalist anti-religious view and an involvement in politics which were to take over his life.

The Chartist movement had its attractions but Holyoake was a practical man and its imperfect organisation prevented his wholehearted attachment. Instead he took up with Robert Owen's Co-operative movement which combined a secularist view of society with efforts to build a practical but idealistic community. Holyoake took up the role of propagandist for the movement but as the case for building a non-religious society tended to tip over into an anti-religious view of society prosecution, if not persecution, followed. Although Holyoake

accepted his trial as an opportunity to argue his case he did not welcome martyrdom. In his view, achieving satisfactory earthly arrangements for society was more important than arguing about the hereafter. This debate among secularists was often bitterly fought and reappeared at regular intervals throughout his life, keeping the various rationalist societies at daggers drawn and inward-looking even at times when they could have made progress.

The ineffectiveness of Owen's co-operative community at Queenswood was a more devastating blow to Holyoake but did not deter him from preaching and writing about socialism and co-operation throughout his life. He recognised the success of the Rochdale pioneers in their alternative strategy for the co-operative movement which has ever since been the centre of the British co-operative movement. Holyoake became a propagandist for the new movement and was still around to take on the role of its first, if somewhat less than objective, historian.

In his long and varied career as an editor, journalist and propagandist, Holyoake was frequently ill and often in debt - politics never paid well - but he was never deterred from putting forward his views for the inspiration of others. If alive in our era, he would almost certainly have been a member of the Labour Party, but one with no time for left wing theorising when there were practical policies to be pursued. In the campaign for the second reform bill, he argued for what was achievable rather than the desirable ideal of one person one vote which had to wait for a new century. As it was he saw himself as a Liberal and worked for the achievement of Liberal victories and for Liberal policies. Some of his campaigning papers are still to found in the Bishopsgate Institute in the City of London.

Grugel never pretends that Holyoake is a major figure in British politics but as he tells you the life story of one campaigner, he builds up a picture both of the idealism of the Victorian working class activists and of the strength of their movement hidden beneath the more familiar veneer of aristocratic *haut politique*.

Grand Old Men

Gladstone

by Roy Jenkins (Macmillan, 1995)

Reviewed by Tony Little

A new biography of Gladstone, the Liberal Party's greatest leader, by Roy Jenkins, the Liberal Democrat Leader in the Lords and best known author, recommends itself without further comment from us. It is the first single volume biography since the publication of the Gladstone diaries, though of course it competes with the two volumes by Colin Matthews based on the prefaces written for the diaries. Jenkins' advantage is his experience of office - he too was a respected Chancellor of the Exchequer - and his knowledge of contemporary Liberal leaders such as Dilke and Asquith who have served as the subjects of earlier Jenkins books.