

## George Jacob Holyoake

from the pamphlet: Freethinkers and Freethought in Brighton and Hove  
W.J. McIlroy

published by Brighton and Hove Humanist Society

George Jacob Holyoake was born in Birmingham of working-class parents. He was largely self-educated and during his long life championed many good causes, including press freedom, mass education and women's rights. The author of over a hundred books and pamphlets, he also edited and contributed to a number of radical journals.

Holyoake was the historian and a figure of international standing in the Co-operative Movement. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was not an easy period for non-conformists of any stripe. Co-operative pioneers were vilified by the Anglican clergy and as a secularist Holyoake was doubly condemned.

Though anxious to distance himself from the vigorous opponents of church and clergy, Holyoake's chance remark at a meeting in Cheltenham (suggesting that the Deity should be put on half pay) resulted in six months imprisonment. And he once declared: "I shudder at the thought of religion and flee the bible as a viper."

Holyoake played a key role in the formation of Brighton Equitable Co-operative Society. There had already been small co-operatives in the town. Most were short-lived, but though they failed, the co-operative idea survived. It was fostered by supporters like Dr. William King and Richard Russell, Licentiate of the Royal Society of Physicians. Lady Byron, widow of the poet, lived for a time in Brighton and was a generous supporter of the Co-operative movement.

The initial meeting of the BECS took place at 29 Duke Street on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 1887. During the following months new members were enrolled and a committee elected. G.J. Holyoake was president.

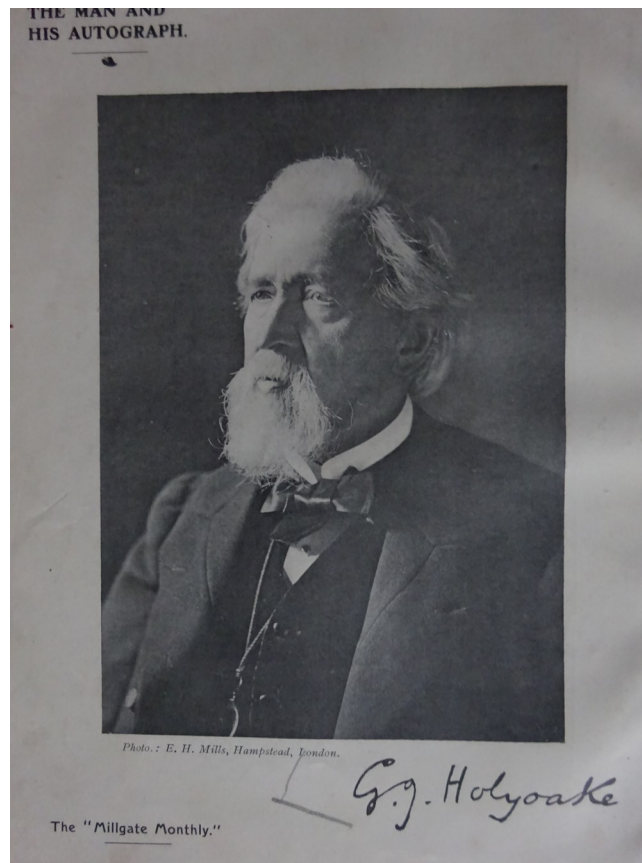
The Society's first shop was opened on 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1888 at 32 North Road. (The shop is still there but in private ownership). The staff of three worked a 73 and a half hour week with a half day off on Wednesday. These near utopian conditions infuriated local shop owners whose staff worked between 75 and 90 hours a week with no half day off. And of course the co-operative dividend on purchases was a boon to working class families.

Holyoake's long association with the Co-operative and freethought movements is reflected in a notable 'double'. In 1844 he presided at the opening of the Rochdale Co-operative store; in 1899 he chaired the inaugural meeting of the Rational Press Association.

George Jacob Holyoake died on 22 January 1906. Five days later his coffin was met at Brighton railway station by dignitaries, representatives and local people. From there it was taken to London where the *Brighton Gazette* recorded "there was no religious ceremony at Golders Green crematorium."

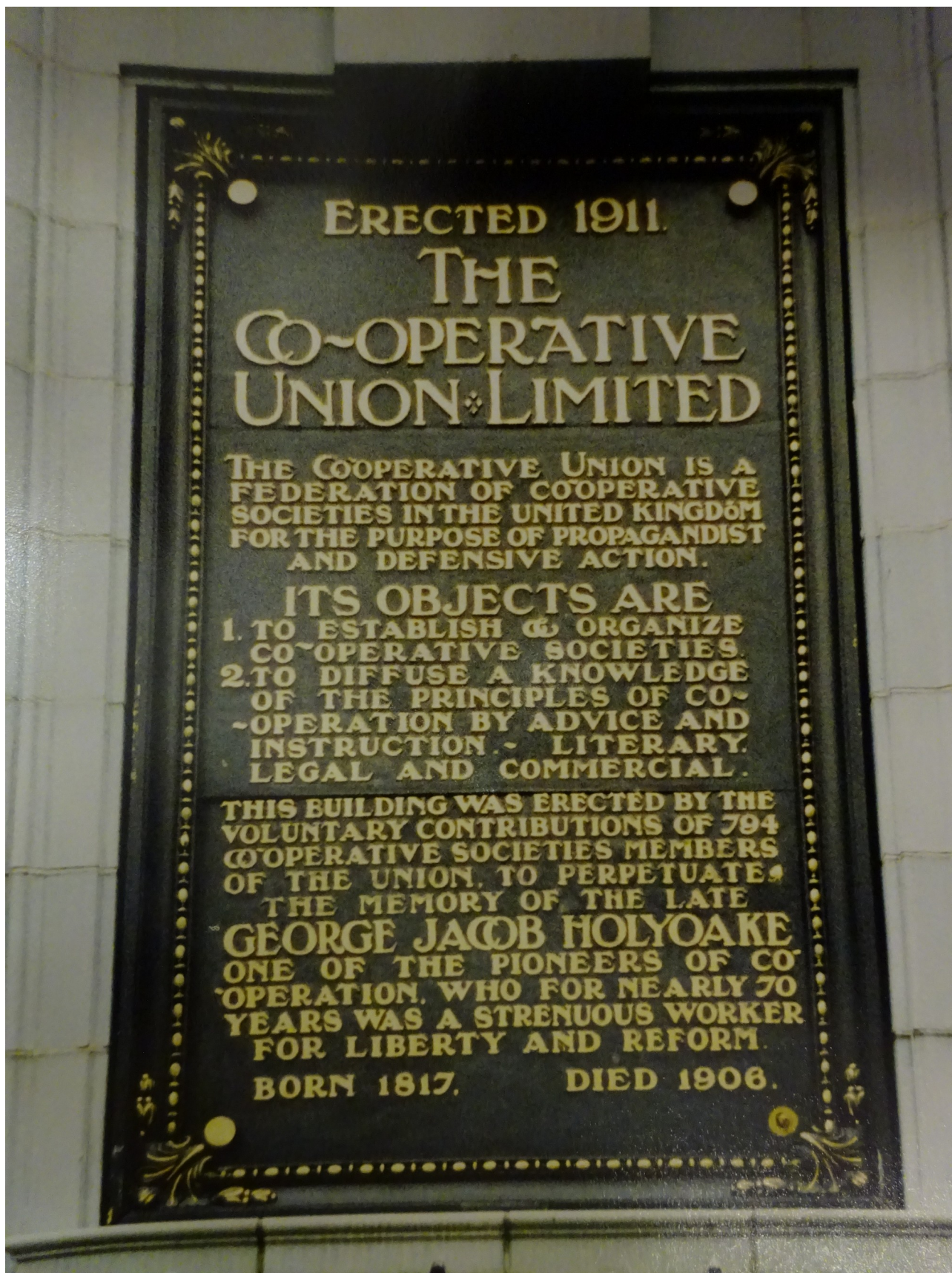
**1851**  
**Secularism Defined**  
**George Jacob Holyoake**  
**(1817–1906)**

George Jacob Holyoake, a British secularist and newspaper editor who was prosecuted for blasphemy in 1842, adopted the word 'secularism' to mean a positive alternative to atheism – 'the province of the real'. Secularist groups formed under the influence of Owenite socialist groups.



G. J. Holyoake  
author of History of Co-operation, volumes one and two





Plaque on Holyoake House, Hanover Street, Manchester  
Opened on the 11<sup>th</sup> November 1911

