

Robert Blatchford, The Clarion and Socialism

Robert Blatchford was born in Maidstone 17th March 1851. His father was an actor who died age 52.

When Robert was 14 he became an apprentice to a brushmaker, which he didn't like, so joined the army and reached the rank of Sargent Major. He left the service in 1878. Robert then became a freelance journalist which led him to becoming leader writer for the Sunday Chronicle in Manchester.

In 1890 Robert founded the Manchester Fabian Society. The following year he launched The Clarion newspaper.

Robert died on 17th December 1943.

from the Sheffield Clarion Website <http://clarionsheffield.info/about%20th%20clarion.html>

“Make socialists and you will get socialism” said Robert Blatchford. Making socialists, socialising the Nation, this is very different to campaigning for votes. With the latter it becomes very easy for the capitalist establishment to win votes through their propaganda machines.

Blatchford identified two socialisms;

Ideal Socialism

Social organisation based on co-operation, awareness and political education, community, culture and solidarity.

Practical Socialism

A series of reforms like nationalisation of the means of production and the eight hour day. This depends upon representation in Parliament and other political bodies.

Without social solidarity and politically aware communities, it will always be doubtful whether socialist and labour candidates will be

elected. It is very easy for the vested interests of the established order to marshal the resources at their disposal to defeat socialist and labour candidates electorally.

Is the object to socialise the nation, or to gain socialist representation in Parliament?

Or are they mutually dependent?

With a background in journalism, Robert Blatchford went on to edit a socialist newspaper, *The Clarion* and brought out the first edition on the 12th December 1891. It was sold on the streets of Manchester. By 1901 it had a weekly readership of 40,000.

He wrote a book called 'Merrie England' which probably made more socialists than any other publication. The first edition which was published in 1892-3 with a print run of 25,000 rapidly sold out. A penny edition was published in 1894 with all 700,000 copies rapidly sold. This edition was loss making. Trades Union rates were paid to the printers. Sales of 'Merrie England' eventually reached 2,000,000.

In 1891 when *The Clarion* was first sold, the 'Social Democratic Federation' (originally called the 'Democratic Federation') had been in existence for ten years, Blatchford was a member.

He was a founder member of the Manchester Independent Labour Party and attended the founding conference of the ILP in Bradford in January 1893. Blatchford saw the ILP as;

“something more than a mere Labour electoral club. It is something more than a mere socialist society. It is an organisation formed to rouse, to educate, and to unite the vast inert masses of the workers, and to give the strength of sympathy and cohesion to the scattered companies and isolated forlorn hopes of social reformers. It will do more than bring out Labour candidates. It will constitute itself into a great machine for the spreading of knowledge, for the destruction of falsehoods, for the investigation of all national and local administrative affairs. (*The Clarion* 28th May 1892).

Blatchford was present at the founding conference of the ILP in January 1893. At this conference he argued for what was known as the fourth

clause which was written into the Manchester ILP constitution. It stated that socialists should abstain from voting at elections in the absence of Labour or socialist candidates. The conference disagreed and was willing to make electoral compromises with the Liberals. For Blatchford “working within an unchanged political system for piecemeal change, for any other reason than a propagandist one, was anathema”. Whilst Blatchford accepted the conference decision, he lost confidence in the ILP.

The Clarion

Margaret Cole wrote about *The Clarion* in the following terms;

“There was never a paper like it; it was not in the least the preconceived idea of a socialist journal. It was not solemn; it was not highbrow; it did not deal in theoretical discussion, or inculcate dreary isms. It was full of stories, jokes and verses – sometimes pretty bad verses and pretty bad jokes – as well as articles. It was written in language which anyone can understand, 'with no middle class unction' ... it believed that anyone whatever his condition or education, who could read plain English could be made into a socialist, and that socialism was not a difficult dogma, but a way of living and thinking which could make all men behave like brothers in the ordinary pursuits of life”.

For Robert Blatchford, socialism was a way of life. It was about good relationships and healthy communities. It was about art, recreation, the appreciation of the good things in life and social interaction. It was about communities building up solidarity and self respect based on political awareness. It was about knowing about the inevitable class conflicts which arise when working class people are exploited and abused by the class of people who control capital. It was about collective self defence by people who's only power is community solidarity. It was about sharing political insight with others.

Blatchford's socialism was not 'working the political system' by making deals with Liberals and others for piecemeal concessions for social improvement. Today we would use the expression 'top down' for this approach, which was anathema to Blatchford.

The Clarion was more than a newspaper, it became a movement which fostered Cycling Clubs and Rambling Clubs, The Vocal Union, Clarion Cinderella Clubs, Glee Clubs and Drama Groups. All communal life enhancing activities.

William Morris, another member of the SDF was of a similar mind to Blatchford. He placed high value on the integrity of craftsmanship. Quality of life through community empathy and work which has an integral purpose, that was Morris's ideal vision for people. He deplored exploitative wage labour for someone else's profit. Surely, communities could do it for themselves. But Morris was aware of the truth of the words of the philosopher and economist, Karl Marx, that the interests of the class which controls capital and the interests of those who work for them are incompatible. Capital gives the minority class enormous power and influence and this is always used to keep that advantage at the expense of the lives of millions of working people. The power that working people have is solidarity with each other. It is always the tactic of the minority class to provoke conflict and division amongst working people.

I am grateful to Dr Martin Wright of the history department, St David's University Lampeter for his chapter in Edward Carpenter and Late Victorian Radicalism, Robert Blatchford, the Clarion Movement, and the crucial years of British socialism, 1891-1900.

Steve Thompson

2017